Nocturne

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Summary

“I can’t have anyone near," Will said, "You’ll screw with my methods.”

“Remind me,” Crawford narrowed his eyes, “just how that works again?”

“Fuck you, that’s how it works,” Will responded flatly; when Crawford opened his mouth with a frown Will leapt in, “don’t start you son of a bitch. You brought me here, you asked me to help. I’m helping. But don’t expect special fucking treatment, understand?”

It was easy to be nasty. Will knew nasty. Nasty was familiar, nasty was an old friend. Just like Crawford, only nasty was easier to deal with. Finally Jack cracked, smiling once more. He opened the door and was half way out before he turned back.

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you,” he said.

“Not an iota."

Because being feared by his peers, despised by his colleagues, hated by the public, and having a healthy mutual dislike for other witches was just a normal day for Will Graham. Being pulled back into the Chesapeake Ripper cold case by Jack Crawford was just sauce on the sundae. And finding out Hannibal Lecter was his new psychiatrist was just the goddamn cherry on top.

Notes

I have to admit, I've been binge watching a lot, I mean a lot, of True Blood. So last night I had some inspiration and this popped out. Please enjoy.

Twine

The room was full of people; noisy, busy, *moving like a hive.* Before him was the table, long, dark wood. Upon it was the body, *Melinda Inman was her name, not a body, a person*. Closing his eyes didn't help. *Christ, I can't hear myself think*. The hand he raised to rub at his aching right temple was shaking.

"Jack? *Jack*."

Will Graham turned to find the man he had asked for standing against the wall, eyebrow raised and phone at his ear. Jack caught his eye and raised his hand, one finger up. Will ground his teeth and tried to reign his anger in tight.

"You asked me here, Crawford," Will muttered loudly, "will you get everyone the hell out of here..?"

"I want them by one o'clock," Jack was speaking into the phone, trying his best to ignore everything Will said, "no later, understand?"

"Jack I swear to god..."

"Good, that's what I wanted to hear," suddenly the man smiled, hanging up as the coroners walked in.

"Don't even think about it!" Will snapped at the two men, making them stop short; he looked to Jack and didn't care that his stare was clearly murderous, "if you let them in to mess with the scene then you let me the hell out. I've seen enough," Will felt his voice break as he swallowed, blinking, "I've seen enough of this shit in my life, I don't need any more of it in my fucking skull. Do you want my help or not? Because if not then all you've done is serve me up a plate of nightmares for the week."

There was a moment of silence, only ruined by the feet and murmur of the crime scene analysts working the house. Eventually Crawford stood up, pocketed his phone and nodded to the coroners.

"Give us a minute, will you boys?" the coroners left looking uncertain, and Jack closed the door after them, "Good enough?"

"Not good enough," Will said, "and you know it. I want everyone out."

"Everyone huh?"

"Including you," Will crossed his arms and couldn't help feeling huddled in; his nerves were jangling like sleigh bells, "I can't have anyone near. You'll screw with my methods."

"Remind me," Crawford narrowed his eyes, "just how that works again?"

"Fuck you, that's how it works," Will responded flatly; when Crawford opened his mouth with a frown Will leapt in, "don't start you son of a bitch. You brought me here, you asked me to *help*. I'm helping. But don't expect special fucking treatment, understand?"

It was easy to be nasty. Will knew nasty. Nasty was familiar, nasty was an old friend. Just like Crawford, only nasty was easier to deal with. Finally Jack cracked, smiling once more. He opened the door and was half way out before he turned back.

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you,” he said.

“Not an iota, now get everyone out. I mean it Jack, you know the rules you’re only getting one shot at this.”

Crawford nodded, his smile fading to a look Will knew well. *Resigned* . The door closed behind him and Will stood stock still, listening. He could feel the house loosing its tight grip on the truth as each pair of feet and camera flash and analysis instrument was trotted out the front door. After five minutes Will walked over to the window, *a large bay window, facing west, it would have caught the sun in the evening*, and closed the curtains. They slid with ease, making a pleasant scraping sound.

“Ok,” he said to himself, taking a deep breath, “*ok*.”

Turning to face the table, Will let the pendulum swing.

Once.

It had started at the door . Will walked steadily to the door Crawford had left minutes before and looked down. There was the first spray of blood, dark now against the door frame and the floor. Something heavy. *He bludgeoned her and she went down in one.* No more spray, but he could follow the drag lines with his feet.

“You dumped her here,” Will said softly as he looked beside the chair at the head of the table, at the pooling blood on the floor, “because you didn’t care about who she was. No respect.”

Twice.

The chairs that were now set neatly back by the table were on the floor. He could see it in the scratch marks on the floorboards, where they had fallen and been dragged. *She fought back, didn’t make this easy.* Either the man they were after was very powerful, or there were two of them.

Thrice.

They had wasted no time. Brought her up onto the table and got to work. One heavy stab to the chest and they had opened her like a tin can. Will looked down at the woman on the table, on her back with her arms and legs splayed. She was pale, so very pale, with long jet black hair all in a tussle. *She had died quick, from the shock. Her eyes had glazed and the pain didn’t register, which would have been a mercy*. The assailant or assailants had worked fast, taking everything they could, emptying her body cavity until there was nothing left but ribs. Then they had scrawled some half-assed pentagram on the wall in her blood, which when Will looked closer had *six* points. So it was really a star of David. Will sneered at the crude drawing and shook his head, looking back to the victim, his eyes softening.

He knew he was ready. He could smell it in the air, a sort of ionised, metallic scent. Pulling out the chair at her head Will sat heavily. It made his skin itch. He licked his lips. *She was served before him, like a meal*. This was nothing so tasty, not a work of art, there was no design here. It was a fraud.

“They killed you for money,” he said as he lifted his hands and placed them on both sides of her face; her eyes were dark, lifeless, “I’m so sorry.”

He licked his lips again. Wasn’t supposed to, hell he knew that. Wasn’t supposed to use it, but it was reliable and it was foolproof and...reflexively he took a deep breath and tried to steel himself. With only a moment of hesitation he reached out and touched the clammy, cold skin of her cheeks with both palms.

A kick like an electric shock, his body was rigid, he could feel the blood in his veins running double time, his heart straining to keep up, and there, there in front of him, if he looked up, just looked up there stood the thing, oh god the thing, the thing was looking right at him!

The next thing he knew he was out the front door and down the steps, rushing as fast as he could without passing out. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, the leaves on the trees rustling like jingling bells, the eyes rising to watch him, the sound of voices, birds, cars. He thought he could hear his name but it was garbled, strange. When two hands grabbed hold of him he stopped, rigid, huffing, gasping, shaking.

“Christ, Will, what the hell is wrong with you? Is that blood on your hands, shit what did I tell you about touching the corpses..?” Crawford was muttering in irritation.

“I saw it,” he managed to choke out, grabbing Jack by the lapels, smearing blood across his fancy grey suit, “I fucking *saw it* Jack, jesus I saw it!”

“Calm down, ok, just calm the hell down. Here, sit here,” Will felt himself bump into something and sit without looking, jerking his gaze around to see that he’d reached the cavalcade of black SUV’s and was now sitting in the back seat, “I’ll get you some water.”

“No, don’t,” Will shook his head, “I need to get it down before it fades, quick for fuck’s sake get me a pen!”

As Crawford stood, legs crossed as he leaned against the side of the car and spoke on the phone in a subdued manner, Will wondered why the hell Jack put up with him. His hands scribbled furiously, using the sight in his mind to form the picture, let it take shape. To be fair, he thought to himself, Jack was the one who always asked for help with the strange cases, but then Will knew he couldn’t refuse. He shouldn’t be so hard on Crawford, he knew that. Still, it didn’t make any of this easier on either of them.

In his fizzy, shaken state, Will didn’t have the nerve to be polite. Instead, when he was done, he simply shoved the clipboard out the door and waited. After he heard Jack end his phone call, he felt the clipboard leave his hand and managed, after blinking to clear his eyes of the last of the vision, to look at Jack standing in the sunlight.

“You’re sure this is what you saw,” Crawford asked, looking sceptical.

“Believe me,” Will muttered, “I wish I wasn’t as sure as I am.”

“Ok,” Jack was nodding, rubbing at his face, “and this is what killed her?”

Shaking his head convulsively Will knew Jack was getting angry at him. He raised his hand and swallowed.

“No, it didn’t kill her,” Will said as he looked down at the drawing in Jack’s hands, *of the ebony figure, tall as a man, fingers like claws, eyes of milky white and, upon its head a rack of fine antlers, jutting up into the sky like a testament*, “it didn’t kill her, but it’s the reason she’s dead,” Will looked up, straight into Jack’s eyes and knew that the man believed him, that in that moment all the bullshit was pushed aside and Jack *believed him*, “it’s eating them, Jack. It’s eating them.”

The cup of coffee made a dull thunk as it was placed in front of him with little care. It spilled over the side, a puddle on the shiny tabletop. The sight made him itch to find a kitchen towel and mop it up.

“Drink it,” he was instructed, though Jack wasn’t looking at him when he said it, tapping something out on his tablet, “it’ll make you feel better.”

“I don’t think caffeine is a good idea right now,” Will said, pushing the plastic cup away and ignoring the sour look of the man who had brought it to him; he hitched up the blanket around his shoulders and shivered.

FBI Headquarters in Baltimore wasn’t exactly the most hospitable place he could think of to be right about then. A big block of concrete built in the seventies, with no shape or fashion to it. More a function than a building, its lack of tact extended to the inside too. Plastic chairs, old paint and chipboard. The break room they were stationed in now came across more like an underground tomb, no windows, no working air conditioning. Will felt buried.

“Couldn’t find anything on the database like what you described,” said the young woman at the table next to him, sitting on her laptop, bright eyes focused, long dark hair waving blue in the artificial light, “you’re sure of what you saw?”

“Unfortunately,” Will swallowed and shrugged.

“Oh, Beverly by the way,” she said, looking up with a smile and a cynical crinkle to her eyes.

“Will Graham,” he said mechanically, unable to meet her eyes.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Ok.”

“I’m Brian,” the surly man who’d brought him his coffee said, looking around a little irritatedly, “not that anyone has cared to ask.”

“You’re supposed to introduce *yourself*,” Beverly said, sipping her vending machine drink with one hand, tapping on her keyboard with the other, “not be asked,” she returned her attention to Will who felt his hackles rise at the shift, “couldn’t have been any of the usual suspects? A monster we already have in the rolodex?”

“No,” Will said succinctly.

“You can be *that* sure?” she asked, eyes narrowing, “so how do these visions work? Can you control it or..?”

“Enough digging Katz,” Jack broke in, putting his device down on the table with a clack, “when Will says he’s sure, then he’s sure. But what about our suspects? There was a pentagram at the scene," Jack observed, picking up a printed picture of the wall, he tried to hand it to Will but was rebuffed.

"No, there was an arts and crafts project," Will said sarcastically; when Jack sighed and Brian frowned Will rolled his eyes, "are you serious? You've never seen misdirection before? Either these are the worst satanists in history or they didn't realise that pentagrams only have five points."

"Good point," Beverly said, smiling wryly as she took the photo from Jack.

"Or they were in a hurry," Brian offered, "were scared and got it wrong?"

“It saw me,” Will blurted out suddenly, hating the pressure of the room; he could feel Jack staring, like heat against his skin. When he looked up Jack was there, right in his personal space, “*back off*,” he spat, eyes dark.

It took a moment, but Crawford obeyed, though he looked put out by the order. Will could tell the others were watching him carefully. Probably hadn’t ever seen anyone speak to their boss like this, Will thought. He took a breath and scratched at his jaw.

“To answer your question,” Will said, motioning to Beverly who was watching him with intent curiosity, “it’s not like a vision, per se. More like, seeing through another’s eyes. It’s not easy to control but I can, if I try. Other times it’s just flashes, short, a little longer sometimes, there doesn’t seem to be a rhyme or reason. Skin to skin contact makes it easier to find what I need, focus in.”

“I heard you can see the future,” Brian spoke up, voice still tinged with resentment.

Will gave him a withering look and continued, “it’s not a reliable thing, like I said. But there’s one thing that I can be sure of,” he looked to Jack, “no one, and I mean no one has ever looked back at me from the other end. It saw me Jack, I swear to god.”

“You’re sure it wasn’t just looking at the victim?”

“It wasn’t even in the room, weren’t you listening to me?” Will scoffed, “I told you it didn’t kill that woman, but it made sure someone else did. Harvested her for everything it wanted. It’s residue was thick on the walls, the floor, like resin running down a tree, hardening into the reality of the room. It was never there but it was...*there*. And it was fucking looking at me! It saw me,” Will knew he looked dangerous because Jack’s mouth was a thin line and, despite her friendly introduction, Beverly’s hand was hovering near her fire arm, “and now that’s my fucking problem, isn’t it. You put me in this situation Jack, what are you going to do about protection?”

“We don’t even know yet if what you saw was real,” Jack said, knowing Will wouldn’t like it if his resigned expression was anything to go by.

“Oh fuck you,” Will said with a tut, getting up and folding the blanket angrily into a neat square before putting it onto his seat, “I should have known the one-way-street policy still stood. If you’re done with me?”

“Not quite,” Jack said, jerking his eyebrows up and bringing them down as he tapped his fingers on the tabletop, “but perhaps that’s enough for one day.”

“Good,” Will said with an acid smile, “because I’ll need time to reaffirm the hexes at my house before it gets dark.”

“I’ll have a uniformed officer posted outside your house for the week, ok?” Jack said, raising both hands palms facing outwards.

“Fat lot of good that’ll do, don’t bother,” Will said with a raised brow, “see you tomorrow?”

“You bet,” Jack was laughing softly as Will left, waving away Brian’s outrage and Beverly’s concern, “he’s fine. Don’t worry, he’ll adjust. He’s always rough at the start. Come on, we’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

Thick with snow striped red by the sunset, his little ship on the sea anchored deep in the Wolf Trap wilderness bumped into view as his truck meandered up the driveway. Parking on the crunching, squeaking ground, Will turned off the engine and sat back with a sigh. He didn’t close his eyes, partly because he was worried he’d fall asleep right where he was, and partly because he was worried about what was lurking there.

It had been a long time since he’d worked with Crawford, and he was beginning to remember why.

“Stupid brat,” Will bit at his bottom lip, “aren’t you. Always looking to see, even what you’re not supposed to.”

The twilight was bringing on the freeze. Will worked quickly, walking his perimeter with the flash-light he’d grabbed from the trunk, making sure his charms were still intact. Most were buried beneath the snow, small trees with scraps of rag tied tight in place, still rust red, another the beak of a crow with the eye of a deer secreted inside, an antler with a carven inscription in rough runes. He knew they wouldn’t stop anything that went bump in the night, but it would let him know what was coming at least.

When he finally stepped over the threshold he was cold, tired, hungry and his jeans were soaked. He closed the door and murmured a quick incantation with his palm against the wood, drawing a simple unicursal hexagram with his forefinger. When he turned back to the room it was to find an array of paws, wagging tails and licking tongues to greet him.

“What, you were all asleep huh? Like me to believe that,” Will said wryly, smiling as he offered strokes and scratches for his throng of mongrels, “come on, it’s dinner time. I know, I know,” he said as the barks started, “I ran late, ok? I’m sorry.”

Seven cans of dog food, one microwave dinner, one shower and one cup of hot chocolate later Will found himself in bed, the glare of the television the only thing lighting the room as the dogs settled, fidgeting for position on the double bed duvet.

“Hey now,” Will frowned sternly as Buster the Jack Russell let a snap out at Angel the Bernese cross as she turned round and round on her spot, “no fighting, or you’re all in your beds on the floor. Got it?”

Buster looked at him with his alert little eyes before putting his head down between his paws, gaze still swivelling back and forth between his companions. Will itched his nose, taking a breath and trying to focus on the crap playing on his television. Buster’s insecurity always made him nervous. He was the most astute of his pack. When Buster was alert, it meant he should be too.

Sleep came fast and sudden. One minute he was checking his clock, the next he was out. Which made the reverse so much more jarring.

The scream of a corvid pecked at his mind, Will jerked awake so quickly that he sent dogs scattering. In his head it still called, *cawing, cawing, cawing;* an alarm. Then the braying of a stag, loud and low and echoing across the moor. Without hesitation he ran to his closet and yanked it open, grabbing the shotgun there, already loaded. Will hissed out ' *quiet, be quiet* ' until the dogs stopped their yelping. On bare feet he hurried out of the room and padded down the stairs. The darkness was all encompassing, caressing his pale skin. It spoke to him. The movements of the air, flowing soft as ether, clean and reliable. Closing his eyes didn't make a blind bit of difference to his sight as he raised the gun. But it did allow him to *see*.

Left, now, the window.

Instinct was a double edged sword, Will knew. It was the reason he was a social pariah, an outcast, to be feared and used more than anything else. But in the same notion it was the reason that, when he fired both barrels of his gun into the window pane, sending glass shattering into the air, the flash of the gunshot revealed the man that had been making to lift the window and break in fly back with a yell, screaming.

Only it wasn't in time to show him the second; an arm around his neck puled him back off his feet, choking and suddenly, screamingly overwhelmed by the images, *fast, flashing, fierce and terrified, blood and gore thick up his arms, eyes watering from the smell, the sulphurous stench, but he cut deeper, deeper, all so this wasn't him next time on the slab*. Will tried to gasp but could barely breathe, his eyes rolling up as the man's fear and rage started to take over.

"What'd you do, you fucking witch!" the man was shouting, "Johnny?! Johnny you ok? Shit!"

Then a yell, sudden and pained, and Will fell forwards with an involuntary shove, hacking and coughing on the ground. His muscles shook, convulsing, but he could hear the snarling and the barking now as the flashes faded.

Right hand, push out, gun. Lamp, table, beyond.

It was in his hand and the light was on, showcasing what was left of the man who had broken into his home. Will managed to get slowly to his feet, looking down. His tan pitbull Lenny had the man's neck in his jaws, shaking him roughly. At the other end Rusty his shepherd cross had the man's ankle, teeth sunk in deep enough to show tendon. Around him the others were yapping and barking, teeth bared. The floor was beginning to pool red.

"Enough," Will coughed, rubbing at his throat, "*hey*, enough," he whistled, garnering eyes and ears. It took a couple of snaps of the fingers to get Lenny to release. The dogs came to his call, surrounding him tightly, protectively. He reached out and caressed Lenny's head as he came to sit by him, Rusty not taking her eyes from the man on the floor, "*stay* now, ok?"

Will decided to keep the gun, just in case. As he walked forwards shakily his foot ended up in the red, the liquid seeping in between his toes. He felt his lip twitch in disgust, eyes narrowing. Hunkering down, looking into the face of a man no more than twenty, tanned, green eyes glazing over, Will cocked his head. This close he could hear the gurgle in the man's throat as it pumped blood freely. Smell the terror, the clamour and the dark, dark sulphur.

"Who sent you?" he asked calmly.

The man's eyes widened, pained. He tried to shake his head but it only made him pale, choking.

"Did they send you here to kill me?" Will asked tightly.

"..N-augh..." the man tried to speak, his lips spattered with red, "no-ach….ch-choll...cht y-y..."

Another hitching, guttural breath and then he was dead. Will wished that the deep breath he took wasn't tainted with the stench of rust. The man had been left staring at him, eyes forever forwards even though they saw nothing. Hesitating, only once, reached out to touch his eyelids closed.

There, like a flash, a smile behind black lips.

Will jerked his hand back as if the man were a furnace he had touched with his bare hands. Standing as quickly as he could Will made his way to the window. Outside, in a pile of glass and blood was an older man, bald and wearing a denim jacket. The holes ripped into his torso were only visible as patches of red in his t-shirt. He was sure there wasn't a need to check the man's pulse. Will had seen enough death to know it on sight.

"*Will, this better be good, it's three in the morning,*" Jack said when he finally picked up the phone.

"I have two dead men in my house," Will said, sitting on his couch with Buster in his lap and Rusty licking at his bloody toes, "couldn't send someone out here to get them, could you?"

"I don't need a doctor."

To be fair, Will knew Crawford's frustration was cut with guilt and that it was making him act out because of it, but it didn't mean he had to pander to it. Will stared at the EMT from behind his glasses and waited. The young woman, blonde hair tied back in a tight ponytail, just smiled.

"It's just routine, Mr. Graham," she said.

"So is an autopsy," Will said morbidly; when she reached out he shifted back, "I don't like to be *touched*."

"I see," she said, still irritatingly chipper, "then can I just do some checks for concussion? And if you can just pop this on your finger and your arm, I'll check your BP and HR."

"Whatever makes you happy," Will sighed.

It was all over quicker than he presumed it would be. Jack was the grease in the cogs of the local P.D., none of which seemed to be taking too kindly to both the FBI presence and to Will himself. But then he already knew that the authorities were wary of him, some definitely prejudice to the extent of open hostility. Most just muttered behind their lips, and kept their nasty comments in their heads. Not enough that Will couldn't catch most of it, camera flashes of vile thoughts, flashes of what they saw him as.

"And here I thought you were gun-shy," Jack was saying when Will blinked, tuning back into the conversation; the blond EMT was gone, and Will found himself concerned that he didn't remember it happening.

"Since when," Will said grouchily, rolling his eyes when he found Jack watching him intently;

jumping images, seeing himself dead, seeing himself murdered, guilt, pain, “Christ, Jack will you keep your fucking thoughts to yourself. I’m in no state.”

“Sorry,” Jack, looked away, “look, I’m just glad you’re ok.”

“Sure, sure,” Will nodded, waving him away, “I can take care of myself.”

“Unless you’ve grown some canines I don’t know about it looks like your mutts might have had the last say on that.”

“Don’t you touch them,” Will said darkly, “they did what’s natural.”

“No one’s touching anything,” Jack sighed, “which is actually what I need to talk to you about...”

“Alright, yes, I touched him, ok? I did and it wasn’t fucking worth it, you’re right, just...” Will swallowed his words as they ran away from him like boulders down a mountainside, “shit.”

The frozen air was starting to nip at his skin. Will rubbed at his upper arms and took in the sight of his house, surrounded by flashing lights, cops and analysts walking in and out of the front door, people inside taking swabs of blood, coroners carrying out the bodies. It wasn’t the first time, but then that didn’t exactly make it any better.

“Do you want to go inside?” Jack asked softly.

Will shook his head, looking down at the wooden boards of his porch.

“Not right now. Not right now, I...” Will swallowed, closing his eyes; it was difficult to voice mainly because he was trying his best to ignore the shock and fear creeping into his system, vines of ivy strangling the tree, “it was the same.”

“What was?”

“I...touched his eyes,” Will said, hurrying on as Jack took a breath and shook his head, “no, I didn’t want to see, he was *looking* at me, ok? I'd just...seen him die and he was looking right at me. I only wanted to close his eyes but I saw it again.”

“The same creature from before?”

Nodding, Will licked his lips and felt them chapped from the cold, “I mean I think so. It felt the same, I think. I’m not sure what’s going on, but it’s not like last time. I don’t think they came here to hurt me.”

“Could have fooled me,” Crawford snorted, “you haven’t seen what they had in their truck.”

“I can guess,” Will said sourly, “but still, I don’t know, I don’t...christ. Look, can we do this tomorrow? I’m really tired and I don’t even know where the hell I’m going to sleep tonight.”

“The Registry is going to be asking some interesting questions about this. But don’t worry,” Jack said, looking as if he wanted to try pushing for more but, eventually, gave up, “I got you covered. Come on.”

“But the dogs...” Will said, frowning.

“They can go too. Pretty sure she told me she didn’t mind.”

It felt like an age since he had driven up the long lane lined by elms, catching the tips of the dawn light rising over the horizon. It must have been three years or so, Will thought as he sat in the back of Jack’s SUV, gently pushing Lenny back into the boot as he tried once more to jump up over the back seat to sit with him. Outside the countryside farmland rolled past, rolling waves of mud, runnels for later potatoes. It was a little difficult to struggle into his thick, black cardigan while he was still buckled in but Will felt exposed. As they rolled up to a familiar house Will pulled on his black fleece hat and tried his best to keep his sharp tongue in his mouth.

When he stepped out of the car Will shook his arms and stretched. His shoulders ached. It was difficult to ignore the pull at the skin across his throat. He wondered if it would bruise. While he stared at the rising sun he heard a door open, looking over reflexively at the noise. The first thing that emerged was a medium sized brown and white dog, running down over fresh snow leaving little dotted paw prints. Will grinned, squatting down as the dog reached him, ruffling her face as she licked at his chin.

“Hey Peanut,” he laughed, allowing himself the small, offered respite.

“Glad she remembers you.”

Looking up was easier with the barrier of a happy, wriggling dog between them. She was watching him like she’d just seen a dear in the woods and was worried that it would run if she moved too fast. Will’s face set, jaded.

“Hi Alana.”

“Hi Will.”

“I’ll leave you two to it then,” Jack said, opening the boot and spilling dogs everywhere, all running over to greet Peanutbutter with sniffs and play bows and sprinting around, “you’ve cost me a lot of paperwork Graham.”

“Sorry my almost being murdered inconvenienced you so badly,” Will said dryly.

“Try not to pile up any more bodies, ok?” he joked, only Will could see it wasn’t really a joke, and he felt his sarcastic armour fail him, his face falling. Instead of showing it he stuck his face in Peanut’s ruff and scratched her flank as the dog leaned into him happily, panting, “I’m leaving Jerry and Fiona here,” he said thumbing towards the car driving up behind them, “for security. Alana, thank you for helping out.”

“Anytime, Jack.”

As the SUV left Will started to feel trapped. You agreed to this, he told himself sternly. Still, not like I had much choice. He would have heard her approach if the dogs hadn’t been making such a fuss. Will looked up to see Alana Bloom standing over him, hands in the pockets of her puffy purple coat, glossy dark hair loose and a little messy. She had bags under her eyes and, without her usual bright lipstick her face looked pale. It was difficult not to fall back into the routine like he’d never left.

“Sorry we woke you up,” he said, licking at the inside of his teeth, “I...uh, and thanks for this.”

“Can we do this inside?” she asked, sniffing, “it’s freezing out here.”

“Right, sure,” Will stood, rubbing his hands together.

The décor hadn’t changed too much since his last visit. Warm honey walls and oak furniture. Old fashioned tiles on the walls of the kitchen. Varnished floorboards with rugs dotted here and there. It suited her, he thought, all yellows and oranges and soft and safe. Zesty but comforting. Will found himself herding the dogs into the back room past the living room, all decked out in blankets and pillows.

“Be good, ok? You’re guests,” Will told them as he shrugged out of his coat, the dogs watching him with cocked ears; he noticed Rusty still had red stains on her muzzle and rubbed at his chin, hoping Alana wouldn’t notice, “And no accidents. I’ll be up at seven to take you out.”

She was waiting for him as he went to hang up his jacket, boiling a kettle on the stove.

“Peppermint tea, right?” she asked without really asking, a formality.

“Right,” Will nodded, not having the heart to tell her he couldn’t really stomach anything right then, “Alana...”

“I made up the guest bedroom,” she interrupted, “the one at the top of the stairs on the right?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Will nodded, frowning, “you’re not even going to ask?”

“Is there a point? I don’t remember ever getting a straight answer from you before.”

“I killed a man tonight,” Will said.

The kettle began to boil, whistling. Alana took it off and placed it on a cork mat, her back to him. Leaning forwards on the counter she let her head hang. The soft lighting mixed with the red in the sunrise, setting the room on fire.

“Jack said you were attacked in your home.”

“I don’t know what they were planning,” Will shrugged, “nothing good. They had a lot of rope in their boot, and some other things designed to incapacitate someone...like me,” he cleared his throat when Alana turned around, looking grim, “uh, look I’m sorry about this, I don’t want to put you in any danger.”

“I’m a big girl, Will, I know the risks.”

“Well, thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” she said sleepily, pouring out two mugs of hot water, tea bags floating inside like little swirling pyramids, “here.”

“I won’t be able to drink it,” Will admitted, amazed that he was falling back to the natural honesty he always allowed himself with her.

“Doesn’t matter,” she smiled softly.

“Ok.”

“Will?”

“I think I should get some sleep.”

“Are you ok?”

Looking up was hard. Looking her in the eye was worse. Will fidgeted but forced himself to bear it. *Memories came unbidden and for a moment he wasn’t sure if they were his or hers, deep inside the asylum, curling down inside his own head to hide from the blood on his hands, retracting so far that his eyes were nothing but blank shells trying their best to keep the images out, the thoughts that weren’t his own, and she was there, and she was talking, and she made sense, and she knew what to say, what threads to pull in order to unravel all of the wool Will had willingly pulled over his own eyes*.

“Not really,” he said, voice small, “I...don’t know why I involved myself in this all over again. I knew something like this might happen and yet I just, I don’t know.”

“You’ll hate me if I tell you this,” she said before blowing on her tea, taking a sip, “but I knew you would come back.”

“Oh yeah?” he said flatly, “Part of your diagnosis?”

“Call it a hunch,” she shrugged, “being your psychiatrist, predicting you was always the most difficult thing,” she smiled tiredly, “I got really good at it.”

“Wish I could say the same,” Will said sourly; he put his tea down on the breakfast bar to his right, taking off his glasses and rubbing at his face. He could feel the wetness on his cheeks, “it’s bad, Alana. It’s really bad this time.”

“Oh Will,” she said, her face falling from guarded to sympathy in a second.

“I think I really fucked up,” as he spoke Will felt the night creep up on him, the shock, the fear, the adrenaline, the realisation; when the tears began to run down his face it was all he could do to sit down and let them. When Alana pushed away from the counter and came towards him he shook his head, mouth mute.

“Touching bad again, huh?” she said, sounding guilty and disappointed.

“Yeah,” Will said, a little choked, “been bad again for a while.”

“How come you never called me?” she asked, standing beside him as close as he could bear, “It’s what I’m here for.”

“Not everything can be fixed,” Will said, rubbing at his cheeks with the back of his right hand, “patched up, yes, but eventually the threads fray. It’s easier to learn to deal with how it really is.”

“Ok. Ok, I understand,” she said, looking a little lost, “I think you were right about that bed. Rest will do you the world of wonders.”

Tomorrow came as eggs and bacon with a side of black coffee. He had walked the dogs in payment for the bed and breakfast services rendered. Alana looked like she could use more sleep, and Will knew from looking in the mirror as he brushed his teeth that he could use a week's worth before he looked normal again.

Still, things moved forwards, not backwards. Soon he found himself being bundled into Alana's sedan, leaving her neighbour from one farm over, Jackie, to dog sit. The Yews looked less mysterious in the daylight than they had the night before.

"This your family home?" he asked as they reached the end of the driveway.

"Uh, yeah, my grandparents built it," she said a little cagily as she signalled and turned out.

"Did they plant the trees too?" he looked over and found her nodding, "they're warding trees. They keep out evil things."

"Sure," Alana said with a chuff of laughter, "and four leaf clovers are lucky. Some things are just superstition."

"I'm almost amazed you can say that with me in your car," Will said with a raised brow; Alana cleared her throat, "I was just trying to make you feel better."

Returning to HQ was like some nasty, recurring nightmare. Will knew what came next. Litanies of questions, investigations, prying eyes. It was a tale as old as time, or at least as old as Will's teenage years, when he had finally realised that the gift he had was a curse more than a blessing, that nothing could stop it, not alcohol, not drugs, legal or illegal, could touch him, and that he couldn't touch anyone else either. That the inside of his head wasn't his own any more and never would be again. A slow decent into the darker places the world had to offer had ripped a rift in his life, right through his home, *his Matron, his sisters.* Leaving them behind and moving to Baltimore had been the only respite he was capable of scrounging.

"Did Jack ask you to come along too?" Will asked while they waited to be cleared for entry, the young man at the desk inserting temp keycards into a reader while he typed up their passes.

"I volunteered actually," Alana, now dressed in her immaculate business attire of blue shirt and brown pencil skirt, black tights and brown boots; her hair was now a set of liquid waves, parted at the side, "thought you could maybe use some backup."

"Always," Will shrugged, "but I just need to check, if I ask you to leave the room then you'll do it."

"Depends," she said, thanking the young man at reception with a smile as she was handed her pass, clipping it to her shirt pocket, "are you trying to pretend to me that you can still handle things, or is it to protect me from things you don't want me to see?"

"Both," Will took his pass carefully, making sure he didn't touch the man's fingers before walking strictly ahead, not waiting for Alana to catch up. Not for the first time in his life he was upset at himself for not stuffing a spare pair of gloves in his pocket.

As they walked the length of the fourth floor Will kept his eyes down, making sure not to pay attention to any prying eyes and keep his breathing even. Shoving his hand in his pocket he found his thick rimmed glasses and fumbled them on, taking a breath as the world became framed, compartmentalised down into two windows he could look through. The sounds of the jumbled

office became smoother, less chaotic. He was able to be more sure that what he heard was in his ears, not his head, and thoughts and images were filtered out.

“You ok?” Alana asked softly as they stood outside Jack’s office and she knocked politely on the door.

Will couldn’t contain the sudden laugh that built up in his chest, breaking out in a warped smile and bright eyes, “You crack me up sometimes, you know that?”

‘*Come in*,’ came the muffled voice from beyond the door; Will took the initiative and turned the handle, walking in first.

Grey, vertical office blinds, rough brown carpet and mahogany wood. Jack’s office was like a time capsule, and for a moment Will thought he could believe it was three years prior, and he was being brought in for the first time, dragged from his teaching post two floors down in the auditorium, to be put to work on something much more front line than just talking about the occult.

Only, right now, something was throwing a spanner in the works of his nostalgia. And Will, tired, shaken, close to the edge as he was, couldn’t keep his mouth from saying what his brain was thinking.

“Who the hell is this?” he asked sternly, pointing to the man seated in front of Jack’s desk.

“Will, let’s not get off to a rocky start,” Jack said amicably, though Will could see the look in his eye that said ‘*don’t make a scene’,* “this is Doctor Hannibal Lecter, he’s come here at my request.”

He heard the door closing behind him, turning to see Alana standing there like a warden. Will felt his instincts firing, hackles rising. When he turned back to the desk, the man there was rising from his chair; to Will it seemed more like he unfolded from his casual, crossed leg posture, standing elegantly and offering his hand.

“It is a pleasure to finally meet you,” he said with a thick, sibilant accent, his eyes heavy lidded, almost hiding the maroon shade of his iris, the long line of his nose leading down to cupids lips that Will watched move as he would a small animal that scurried into the bushes and hid, eyes peering outwards into the light. It took a moment to blink and look away, swallowing.

“I guess Jack hasn’t told you,” Will said tightly, “I don’t do handshakes.”

“Ah, my apologies,” Lecter said, retracting his hand, “I am sure I was told, but formalities are rather instinctual. Shall we sit?”

"Are you from the Registry?" Will asked coldly, "Because I am not interested in an escort."

All he received was a smile that reached all the way up into maroon eyes, as if he'd told an exceptionally crafted joke that no one understood but the man standing before him. Will shook his head and crossed his arms.

“I'm not agreeing to anything until I get an explanation,” Will said, looking at Jack while the man leaned back in his chair and sighed.

“This case has become rather...complex,” Jack began, “you know that. And you know that my team can’t fully support you, nor can I afford to have you only as a consult. I want you to come on the

team full time until this is resolved. Your abilities are intrinsic to how I plan to run this investigation. So, after speaking with Doctor Bloom," Jack motioned to Alana, and Will couldn't bring himself to look at her just then, "I decided to bring Doctor Lecter in. He'll be your psychiatric support."

"I've already got one," Will said succinctly, jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards Alana.

"I'm not..." Will looked at her over his shoulder, seeing her hesitation; she smiled loosely with the right side of her mouth, "I can't offer you what you need for this Will. Hannibal is more than capable, he was my mentor. I really think you should give him a chance."

"...You mean you won't," Will said, looking away, his skin suddenly feeling as if tiny insects were crawling there. The upset tried to spread to his eyes but he wouldn't let it. Finally the quiet room became like a cell and Will reached up to take off his glasses, rub at the bridge of his nose. When he looked back to Lecter the man was watching him calmly, inscrutable, "no lies."

"Of course," Lecter nodded.

"No manipulation, no secrets, no judgement."

"I believe I can offer that."

"Good," Will said, pushing all the ticking, sickening hurt down deep, back into its cage; he jerked his head towards Lecter, "he'll do. Now I'm going downstairs. Maybe some of the corpses will be happier to see me."

Bird's Nest

Chapter Notes

Any translations needed are at the end of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Drums, and an off key note playing. Hovering in the air like the hum of insects wings. He was awake, he was sure, but he didn't remember falling asleep. The sheets were light, trilling away as they fell from his skin. His feet felt as if they were not his own, stepping lightly across the floor, knots of the wood against the soles of his feet.

Outside the world was painted silver in the night. The moon was full, floating above, rippling as if staring up into a vast, dark ocean. His feet carried him forwards, across the porch and down onto the rough dirt, the sharp sticks and jutting stones. Part of him was sure his feet were bleeding, but still they drew him onwards. Around him the air was still, warm, comforting like a blanket.

The noise grew louder, stronger as he walked out into the snow. The green bushes looked black in the moonlight, the trees hiding the thicket like a jewel. Walking into the wood seemed the only choice. *Louder, louder*. Leaves trailed across his naked thighs, sticky willows gripping at his ankles. Pushing forwards, *forwards, forwards*.

Then there, through the trees, all collected together like watchers in the dark, *something moved*. He stopped, took a step back, felt the greenery at his legs grip and pull, urging him onwards. The forest moved, swaying though there was no wind. Something was wrong, something was festering. It took a moment of bravery to step forwards, then a step of foolishness to continue.

And then it was there. A halo of grass, glinting in the light of the moon, emerged from the thicket. There, in the centre, stood the stag. Proud and black, shivering it's feather-fur, long neck extended as it reared up on hind legs and brayed into the night, a long, hollow, deep shaking note that ended in a high pitched whine, antlers praising the air. At its foot was a clamping trap, horrible metal jaws gripping its leg, blood running over its hoof.

"*No,*" was all he could sob.

Looking down was *instinct.* A pair of ebony hands sliding around, across his chest and waist. His head swam, breath hitching, feeling the claws scratch, gouge, leave bloody runnels on his flesh as they closed in, pulling him *closer*, *closer, deeper, deeper.* His breath stuck, his fear rose into his throat, choking his words shut. His head fall back, lolling against a neck, a shoulder, eyes looking up to the sky as seen through a set of spiky, black tree branches. The hands began to explore. He shivered, gasping, unable to move. Trying to look, trying to see, it was impossible, it was terrifying. The world began to shift and slide, tipped on its edge as everything began to tumble, drifting, crashing, escalating. He wished he could make it stop. His body paid him no heed. *The hands manipulated him, tracing the lines of his desire.*

Then the black lips opened and placed themselves by his ear.

"*Will, are you awake in there*?"

Knocking, each pound as if it were against his own head. Will jerked from the grip of the dream as if he'd fallen from a height. Sitting up was like landing on something soft...until the hangover kicked in. He found himself tangled in his sheets, letting out a sound of frustration as the ache in his pounding temples began to make itself at home. Again the knocking came, followed by Alana's voice, "*Will? I'm putting breakfast on."*

"Ok, yes, I'm up, I'll..." Will, finally managing to extricate himself from the bed, looked down and swallowed, realising that the dream had taken more of a toll than he'd realised, "...I'll be a few minutes, just need to take a shower."

At the very least he could be sure that the sound of rushing water would mask the sounds he was incapable of withholding as he set about finishing what the dream had started. He was left breathing hard, hands flat against the tile as he lifted his head into the spray and let the water blind and deafen him. The pricking smacks of the water were soothing against his hot skin and aching muscles.

"So much for compartmentalisation," Will muttered grimly to himself as he let the dream fade, beginning to find it difficult to recall what it had even been about.

Dried and dressed and feeling like shit, Will Graham trotted down the stairs to join his closest friend for breakfast.

"You're up late," Alana said as he ambled into the kitchen.

"Do you have any ibuprofen?" Will asked, opening a couple of drawers in the main counter by the window and riffling through.

"Here," she stopped poking at the eggs in the frying pan and reached over to a bowl on a shelf, tossing him a small red and white packet.

"Thanks," Will said, pouring a glass of water to down his pills, even as his quick eyes glanced between Alana and the bowl and wondered why she kept them so readily to hand, "I'll take the dogs out."

"Already done," she smiled at him as she plated up; *the fried eggs and bacon spoke to him on a level his hangover wouldn't let him pass up,* even as the situation began to feel disquietingly familiar, "here, you'll need it. Soaks up whiskey like a charm."

"Was I that bad?" Will asked, scratching at his neck.

"I'm not judging," she said as she put his plate at the head of the table, and hers next to his.

They sat, cutlery scraping against crockery, in silence except for the sounds of chewing. Several things came to mind, benign topics of conversation that would at least absolve him of the quiet, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. To play in to the lie that was building around them. When they both reached for the salt at the same moment Will pulled his hand back quickly and stiffened, but Alana only laughed easily and smiled at him, eyes open and kind and happy.

His lips were soft, that's what she remembered, soft and his eyes kind and lost, his tragic beauty keeping her wishing for more, enough that she kissed him again and again.

Focusing on his plate, shovelling food into his mouth and chewing, was all that could keep him from seeing into her head and finding what he didn't want to see. For once he wished things could stay simple but, as he reminded himself that emotions ingrained as deep as scar tissue never truly healed, he knew they could not.

"How long since they started?"

Jack paused, sending Will an irritated stare as he pressed the clicker in his hand to send the projector to the next page. Next to him Beverly Katz let out a puff of air and put her feet up on a chair, and next to her Brian Zeller let his head drop back with a groan.

"Maybe if you stopped interrupting me and let me speak, you'd find out the answers to all these questions you keep hassling me with."

"Ok," Will said dismissively, crossing his arms and sniffing, "carry on."

"I don't need your approval, Graham. Now shut up and listen."

The case became like a pencil sketch, all faint lines guessing at where the image should be. Sketchy facts, sketchy motives, sketchy case. *Six months since they had found the first victim, four bodies blessing the air with their innards, nearly every one a different MO, different locations, different victimology, no correlating factor except one: all had been completely emptied of their insides, from gut to heart to gall bladder. Three female, one male, all under thirty.*

"You're sure that there are only four?"

Today Will had remembered his gloves, and gladly they made him feel less likely to pick up on anything untoward. He knew it was psychosomatic, but then Will was a creature of habit, as well as superstition. When he focused back on the man he was addressing he found Jack rubbing at his face, eyes closed. It made Will frown, lips twisting into a grimace.

"I waited till you were finished," he said in frustration, "what, you want me to give you a round of applause?"

"I want you to follow the damn procedure," Jack said, gesturing to the room, "victimology, location, means of..."

"Procedure?" Will scoffed, butting in, "You gotta be kidding me, I think considering the circumstances we're a bit beyond that, aren't we? Especially since you're working with a whole load of pieces missing."

Silence, paired with three sets of eyes zoning in on him. Will felt the anxiety meter ticking higher. It was a nasty quirk of his character, that he had always hated to be the centre of attention; ever since he'd first blurted out his primary school teacher's thoughts about her husband's gambling habit, right up to accidentally absorbing memories from his colleagues and telling them things he couldn't possibly know. The sick joke was that everything he did drew everyone's attention right down on his head. He could literally feel his skin bristling.

"Is this what it's like with you?" Zeller asked, *the mockery in his voice hiding beneath the veneer of societal norms*, "Jack, what the hell is..."

“There are only three things that these people have in common,” Will said loudly, tersely, feeling his shoulders bunch up around his neck, “their age bracket, the removal of the organs from the body and the dates of the kills,” hearing his voice begin to lilt with emotion and panic, “First of January, eighth of January, fourteenth of February, fifth of April,” he looked at Jack and lifted a brow, “they’re *lunar*.”

“Actually we’ve had that checked already,” Brian Zeller sing-songed, “there’s no consistency with the full moon or anything like that.”

“Why would it have to be a full moon?” Will frowned, standing up to point at the screen, mainly just to get away from the man’s negative energy, “Look, here. It’s the first quarter, full moon, third quarter then a full moon again. They’re one or two days out each time, which would make sense since they’re harvesting organs. They’re not doing it *on* the day for whatever ritual they’re pulling, they’re doing it in advance.”

“Which means they’re transporting them,” Beverly said, Will nodding at her deduction, “that would take kit. I’ll look into it.”

It was obvious how quiet Jack was staying, and how loud he was becoming to compensate. Loud, thumping in his ears: loud, to cover the anxiety; loud to make people back off. Will tried a deep breath and blinked rapidly when it did jack shit. The panic was beginning to take on a physical creation, enough to make it hard to keep out...

Lashing against his calm, scared of what he had created, what he had done, and allowing it as Will punched him square in the face, screaming .

A punch card flicking rolodex of the victims, flashing faces of death and death and milky eyes and red, open chests gaping and screaming.

A de rigeur pull apart of all that was wrong with him, hysterical, wild, witch-fire, hatred, screaming.

He couldn’t keep it out, he couldn’t keep the wall up, he couldn't keep the cage locked. Scanning the eyes of his colleagues let Will know that, at the very least, they hadn’t noticed he’d picked up on their thoughts. It was automatic, *his instincts kicking in, taking over, just as they always used to do when coping became the problem*. Talking and reasoning and trying just to be what everyone else was.

"I'm still not hearing what this has to do with there being more victims," Jack said strictly.

“B-because by the structure they’re going for, and how long since you suspect they started, you’re missing,” Will counted, lips moving but not speaking as he did some quick calculations, “seven more.”

“*Seven*?” Jack stated, sounding less outraged at Will’s statement and more sickened by the thought of it.

“You know all that just by the dates?” Beverly, who was looking at her phone, seemed impressed; she leaned over to show Brian who just shrugged, “Wouldn’t it be ten?” Beverly asked as she showed Will the chart she’d pulled up.

“No point in doing it on n-new moon nights,” Will stuttered, feeling his chest tighten, “if they’re following the old ways. If n-not then yes, you’re looking at another ten, but I doubt it.”

“You said it was eating them,” Jack cut in.

“Yeah. Yeah, that I can be sure of, but it’s not taking part in the murders.”

“Then you’re thinking..?” Beverly frowned, and then her eyes lit up with excitement, “familiars? *Actual* familiars? I’ve never come across any in real life.”

“Ok, we’re jumping to conclusions here,” Zeller said incredulously, sitting forwards and putting his hands out to the sides, palms curved in; Brian took advantage of the silence, “we’re here to follow evidence, not hypothesise over some hocus pocus bullshit theory. If we go down that route we’d end up like...” he trailed off as Jack gave him a significant look.

“Like what?” Will asked darkly, feeling the shock of the world he’d left behind creeping up on him with monstrous claws: *skimming the likeness of her from his mind as Zeller couldn’t stop thinking about the articles he’d read, the stories he’d heard, all cobbled together into a mirage of lies and horror about the reason Will had fled into the wilderness all those years ago*. He found himself looking at Brian out the corner of his eye; despite the man’s bravado he’d stopped short, sitting back in his chair and clicking his tongue, “come on, *like what*?”

“We’re not doing this,” Jack said, holding up his hand as Will opened his mouth, but it did little good.

“Like my last case, is that what you wanted to say?” Will said with quiet confrontation, stepping forwards.

“*Will!* Enough,” Jack said sternly, “Go outside and cool off, I said out and cool off!” Jack said as Will made to protest.

“Fine,” Will ground out, “fucking fine.”

Outside the office wasn’t good enough, and neither was the hallway beyond that, and neither was the building when Will marched out the front door, seething. Breathing in deep and out slow could only do so much to stem the exponential anger and hysteria rising. Everything buzzed, snapped, poked and pinched at him; *sounds, images, feelings*.

“Christ,” he muttered, standing in the parking lot next to his car, banging his forehead against the metal, “fucking asshole, doesn’t know what he’s talking about, fucking *prick* doesn’t have the fucking right to...”

The sound of the air and the birds in the large elm tree that stood in the corner of the lot was easier to handle than people answering phones and fingers typing on keyboards at the very least. When he pulled out his phone Will automatically drew up his contacts and scrolled down until ‘*Doctor Alana Bloom’* came into view. His thumb hesitated, breath sticking in his throat.

Alana knew everything, from the moment Will had lost what was left of his sanity to when he had clawed it back, from the moment his best friend had started appearing in pieces until the day Will ended it all with a series of bullets until the gun stopped firing and started clicking, dry.

I need you, Will thought. But she had discarded him, Alana didn't want to deal with his shit any more, she had made that abundantly clear. He scrolled again, finding his Matron, but it went to voicemail; ' *Hello, this is Hannah, I can't come to the phone right now but please leave me...'* . Closing his eyes for a moment he tried to find his centre, stop the anxiety seeping through his blood like a poison. It didn't work. When he opened his eyes again he dug in his back pocket for his wallet and pulled out the smooth, ivory card he'd been given a couple of days before, elegantly applied with name and an address : *Dr. Hannibal Lecter, Parapsychologist: 687 Bayshore Avenue, Suite 200* . As he stood, staring at the card, the phone in his hand began to ring - *Jack Crawford* . Will looked at it for another few rings before hanging up, opening the truck door and climbing into the driver's seat.

Not that he'd been sure what he was expecting, but it might have been something along the lines of a fancy high rise, some executive skyscraper all glass and steel. Instead he found himself pulling up in front of a typical Georgian three story with windows in the roof, columns at the front door and iron palisades with a wrought iron gate, tipped with gold. It was old worldly, set in the shadow of the Romanesque church next door, but then overshadowed further by the very thing Will had thought of, *a skyscraper of glass and steel.*

But with what little thought he was able to give to the building, the setting, it truly seemed to suit the quick impression he had gained of the man who had been assigned as his anchor to the world of sanity. Old world, gentlemanly, aristocratic. Which would be something that would weigh down upon him later as an extra burden when he began to feel sorry for what he did next.

It had built in energy, latent electric feeling. It circled and circled and ground around in his mind, and the faster he'd driven the worse it got. Voices and images and voices and images, all leading to the same place. **Her dead face staring up at him with a smile**. *You can't control yourself.* The sickening part was that he'd never denied it. The painful part was that it had been what got her killed. *You're fault, you freak, you're fault she's dead.*

Green walls and vague artwork was all he picked up from the waiting room, the little he saw of it before he barged in through the dark wooden door to the sound of a startled ' *oh my god* ' and the sight of a woman twisting around in her chair to look at him and Lecter sitting up from his crossed-leg relaxed posture, eyes narrow with surprise and…

Sudden and hateful, he'd smacked her square in the face and shamed her a slut, even as he'd wanted to see it, touch her, hate her like she hated him. She hadn't meant to hurt him, she hadn't meant to she just couldn't control it . The woman's thoughts were hot and loud and sudden and unwanted and he had no way to filter them.

"G-get her out," Will breathed in and felt it stick in his throat, pointing at her, eyes wild, "I can't, I don't want to hear you *get out!* "

"Marianne if you would excuse us," Lecter stood peremptorily and bodily led the distraught woman quickly to the door.

" *God,* this isn't fucking happening..." Will closed his eyes and tried to block the sounds out, heels of his hands over his eyes; **behind them she stared up at him accusingly, blue eyes soulless, dead, rotting**. Will pulled his hands up and into his hair, shaking. It had been so long, it had been long enough, he could control this, he could, he should be able to..."I n-need your help."

“This was most unprecedented. I must clarify that this sort of behaviour is unacceptable.”

“I can’t care about your sensibilities right now Doctor,” hearing the man approach, “just keep away from me and...”

Strict footsteps and then a hand, *a hand and an arm and nothing else, that’s all they found, that’s all there was* , fell down on his shoulder. The moment seemed to stretch out indefinitely. His eye moved before his limbs could, staring down across the curve of his elbow at the hand, *the hand curled, blue tinted fingernails, bloodless skin*, resting against his shirt like a weight upon his chest.

“Get off,” he whispered, aware of the thumps and crashes in the room around him, “ *get your fucking hand off of me* .”

“Will, you appear to be having some sort of episode,” he could barely hear the words, see the lips move, feel *the hand* leave him, “I would like you to calm down and listen to my voice.”

“She won’t stop looking at me,” Will’s own voice shook, his mind blanking, an open plain with only one sight on the horizon, “he doesn’t have any right to talk about her. It’s not fair.”

“Keep your eyes forwards, there is no sense in looking backwards, it will only allow you to fall faster.”

“I feel like I’m fading,” Will said softly, *she was drifting towards him, as if in truth he was going to her, drawn like a fish caught on the line as the reel spun* .

“Don't go inside, Will. You'll want to retreat. You'll want it as the glint of the rail tempts us when we hear the approaching train. Stay with me.”

“Why won’t she let me go?” Will could hear the sob in his voice and couldn’t stand the pressure in his skull, the building madness.

“To whom are you referring?” Lecter sounded close, so close it felt claustrophobic; the sounds were accelerating, the banging along with papers fluttering, rustling like dead tree leaves.

“You know,” Will could feel the eyes on him as she became closer, “Jack would have told you. He tells everyone,” he felt his voice break as she became clearer, “the nightmares follow me out of my dreams only it’s really there and no one else can see it but me. Am I crazy? I don’t know if she’s *real*.”

“I believe you are referring,” Lecter sounded so close that Will couldn’t understand why he couldn’t feel the man against him, pressing, as he uttered the one thing Will couldn’t hear, *don’t say it to me, please don’t, please don’t do this to me!* “to Miriam Lass.”

And then she was clearer to him than the pounding in his chest, the voice by his ear and the air in his lungs. She appeared before him like an unfinished homunculus, lopsided with one arm, mouth chapped and cracked and eyes sewn shut. She smiled and her teeth were gone, nothing but a maw .

HELLO WILLIAM.

“*No*,” he barely managed the word, but when it came it jerked out of his mouth like a bullet throwing him backwards, hitting into the desk with bruising accuracy; and then, there, at his side,

Lecter reached out to touch, *to touch.* His instincts flared and Will grit his teeth in a snarl, reaching out with both arms to sweep what he could catch off of the desk towards the man, forcing him to startle back from his assault.

Running was the only way out.

Hannibal Lecter took a long breath and brushed down his tie as he listened to the sound of wheels peeling out on the street, honking horns, and looked down to the mess on the floor: his patient journal, his writing case and his lamp, now broken, spewing glass out onto the floor. Yet that was small potatoes compared to the far larger mess in the rest of the room: dozens of books, papers and figurines, scattered out across the wooden floorboards as if thrown in a fit of rage by unseen hands. The devastation was admirable in its unfocused and raw nature.

It was impossible to stop his lips from curving into a smile that reached all the way up into his eyes. In his pocket he felt his phone ring silently. Fetching it he found just the name he had hoped to see emblazoned on the screen, answering calmly.

“Jack, how might I be of service?”

He nearly pulled it off. Truthfully he should have known that, in his state, there was no way he could focus enough to predict all eventualities.

Most was done and dusted. He’d barely unpacked so there were only a few clothes to stuff away, some toiletries to grab. The dogs were excitable but they understood it was urgent, he could tell by the way not a single tongue or paw had touched him since he’d barrelled into the house fifteen minutes earlier and begun systematically removing his presence from it.

Except he had forgotten the one spanner in the works.

“Jack was right,” her voice came from the doorway to the spare room; he turned for a second to see her leaning there, arms folded, before looking back to his rucksack, yanking the zip closed.

“I suppose he is,” Will agreed, voice flat.

“You’re not even going to ask what he said?” Alana asked, sounding hurt.

“I’m sure, whatever it is,” Will shouldered the rucksack and walked briskly past her, “it’s warranted. I’m going home.”

“You don’t have to go right this second,” her voice followed him along the corridor and down the stairs as she rushed to keep up, “Will for crying out loud we can talk about this.”

“Really?” Will grabbed the holdall he’d dumped in the kitchen, all unwilling resentment as he put his fingers in his mouth and let out a fierce whistle, “Because talking is what got me into this whole damn mess in the first place. Opening my mouth and letting noise come out seems like a bad idea these days,” the paws came scurrying, loping and Will held the door open as the dogs rushed out into the sunlight; Will looked up and stared at the woman there who had once saved his life, who

cared for him and was capable of more than he could ever ask for, ever deserve, “you can’t pin all your hopes on me Alana.”

“We’re not talking about me here,” she said, face set, lips thin and accusatory, hands on her hips, “you can’t face this all alone, Will. Trauma isn’t an itch you can scratch when you feel the need. It’s a scab, and you’re picking at it.”

“Maybe I’m a masochist,” Will smiled nastily, “ever think of that?”

“You’re not a masochist, you’re not that interesting,” Alana bit back.

“You’re right,” Will said, “if I was then I would stay here and let you use me as a proxy for your loneliness. You don’t love me, Alana, don’t let circumstance fool you into thinking this is going anywhere. That ship sailed a long time ago.”

“Awful full of ourselves, aren’t we,” she shook her head but couldn’t seem to bring herself to deny it, “get the hell out of my house before I throw you out.”

“I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction,” Will said coldly.

“You’re making it very,” she looked away and shook her head, eyes glassy, “very, hard to forgive you.”

“Forgiveness isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Don’t tell Jack where I went.”

Leaving Alana standing there weighed on him more than he could admit to her. As he pulled out onto the driveway he stayed focused, knowing that it was better to be truthful than to lie to her at this point. For him, love was a poisoned word that came with a host of miserable side effects but the longer he’d stayed the more difficult it would have been to remember that.

As he reached the road and indicated left, Will looked out at the last of the tall, proud elms, swaying in the golden light at the end of Alana Bloom’s driveway. Somehow he felt judged.

“Go bhfásfaidh do fhréamhacha go domhain,” he murmured before leaving without looking back, taking his regrets with him.

The house seemed to watch him as he approached. It was unpleasant, like he was a stranger. It didn’t help that he had to cut his way through the crime scene seal with his Swiss army knife just to get in.

“Mother fucker.”

It was all he could think to say as he looked at the mess still left in his living room and on his porch, from the broken window to the blood still staining his rug and floorboards. *God damn FBI pieces of shit* , was all he could think as he herded the dogs through to the back of the house, showering them in treats to keep them happy while he set about cleaning up. The house seemed emptier than normal, like all the good feeling that had been left there was scared away into corners and cracks in the walls.

“So much for a relaxing day off,” Will reached up to rub at his face with both hands.

It took a good three hours, picking up the pieces of where he'd left off four days ago when he'd been led from his home in a blanket and bundled into Jack's car. As Will was down on his hands and knees scrubbing the floorboards, picking up glass carefully from his porch and pulling buckshot out of his window pane with pliers, it gave him time to think about why he was treating this so normally. *A man died here,* it kept circling his brain, wearing at his already thin nerves, *you watched him die. Just like you watched her*.

"Maybe," he huffed out as he scrubbed furiously at the large stain on his porch, "the reason you think this is *normal* is because you're so fucked up you can't even let someone love you when they try, *ah!* Dammit!"

Will rolled back to sit on the floor, rubbing at the knee he'd leaned on awkwardly. Around the corner poked a messy white head.

"It's ok Bailey," he said as the little curly dog padded towards him, climbing up on his leg with her front paws to lick at his face while her tail wagged, "ah, come on. Do I look that screwed? Fine, ok, haha, oi stop it," he laughed, trying not to get pink tinged soap suds all over as he ruffled her fur.

Everything faded with time, was the mantra he had tried for, but as he set about stripping the varnish from the floorboards with his sander, washing it, leaving it to dry and then reapplying a new coat he ended up preferring, *hiding your pain goes a long way*. And it did, and it always had.

Pulling off his face mask and goggles Will managed to snort a laugh at himself in the mirror, his uncovered skin and hair beige with sawdust. Walking in to the kitchen Will leaned in to a cubby hole and clicked on the immersion. The afternoon had passed and not a single phone chime had rung out for attention. In a way it was good, because he really wasn't up to facing Crawford and being forced to apologise, but on the other end it chafed at his nerves because he knew, remembered vividly, that Crawford always allowed him his space when things got dicey. And, even though Jack would probably tell him he was a liar ten times over if Will were to ever bring it up to him, all he'd ever asked of anyone was to be treated just like everyone else.

Tap, tap, tap . Will looked up from the sink where he was washing his hands to find a magpie at his window, large black beak tapping at the glass above the parsley he had growing there in a window box. It's beady black eye peered in at him as it turned its head, ruffling its beautiful wings and bobbing it's black-shining-green tail feathers. He shook his hands dry and smiled as it cawed harshly.

"Miss me huh?" Will said as he grabbed a bag of boiled peanuts from under the sink.

He filled the feeders he had stationed by the back door, on tall slim poles so the squirrels couldn't clean them out. The Magpie jumped about on his porch railing, chittering to herself.

"Where are the twins?" he asked as he filled the last bird feeder, clicking the top back into place, "Didn't bring them today?"

A hop, then another, then she extended her long neck, feathers ruffling out, and let out a high pitched set of off key squeaks. Will looked up and saw two smaller black and white birds on his roof, walking around with their stiff legged gait. He grinned and stretched his arms up, fingers interlinked.

"Enjoy your meal," he said as he left them to it.

While he was out he set about restocking the hay feeder at the back fence, and then emptying and cleaning the water bowls. The air was chill but the breeze wasn't cutting. The weather vane on the roof showed it was an easterly. Will looked at the sky and judged the axis to the rising moon with his thumb and one eye closed. *Still a little early* , he thought. He looked over his shoulder and smiled at the mother magpie trying to teach her children to fly up and grab on to the feeders; it still wasn't going well. With their chittering and squawking for company Will set about preparing: the rosemary offered clippings from the tips, parsley, sage, sweetgrass, and the dogwood was just closing its flowers at this time in the evening making them easier to pinch out.

When the phone buzzed in his pocket he was boiling the kettle. Fishing it out he decided, on a whim, not to look at the screen before answering.

"Graham," he answered.

"Well hello stranger!" came a welcome voice, crackling with age, "I only just saw your call, I'm sorry I missed you."

"Halò Hannah," he said pouring out a mug of hot water, "Feicimis a chéile faoi soilbhreas."

"Go mBeannaí an bandia tú," she said with her pleasant southern lilt, "now come on, out with it."

"Out with what?" Will asked, surly.

"Don't try the petulance with me," she said, "it'll get neither of us along the road. Now make your tea, sit down and tell me what you need."

Will looked at the teabag he was dropping into the cup and smiled wryly.

"I thought I told you not to spy on me."

"It was just a hunch," she said innocently.

"Yeah, right."

Nearly a year now, he thought as he talked to her as easily as water runs downstream, since he'd made the trip to Louisiana, to be one of the thirteen. He'd told Hannah a thousand times just to replace him, but so far as yet he didn't think she had the heart. They counted him as their long distance cousin now, it seemed. Sometimes he missed the smell of the heat and humidity in his nostrils, the sweat on his skin and the sounds of crickets at night. His coven deep in the backwaters.

"That's quite the story," Hannah was saying with a kick of kind laughter in her voice mixed with worry as he finished telling her his recent exploits, heavily edited of course.

"Isn't it always?" Will said, feet up on the table as he looked out at the setting sun, "If a normal day passed by without event I'd think the world was ending."

"I was trying to be polite dear," Hannah said coyly, "now what aren't you telling me?"

"I didn't..." Will sighed, "I only got home a few hours ago and since then I've spent most of that time scraping blood off my floor. Can we not do this right now? It's nearly..."

"You can do the cleansing ritual any time before midnight. Now, if you don't get it off your chest I'm not going to be sorry when it comes back up to bite'cha."

Chewing at the inside of his lip Will swallowed. Somehow it was worse than telling her that he'd killed a man in his own house.

"I saw...her. Again," Will admitted slowly.

"Oh my," a pause, "it's been a long time. I thought that was dealt with."

"It's never going to be dealt with," Will shrugged, "we both knew that."

"Honestly? I thought last time we might have banished it. Seems you're not making this easy for us."

"I didn't mean to..." he stopped in the lie and swallowed it back down his throat, huddling down into the couch and trying his best to sound contrite, "ok, I'm sorry. I didn't keep up my side of the bargain."

"Will Graham, that ritual took a year to set up, you know that," she said sternly, "and we did it for you, not for us, not for anyone else. That curse will eat you alive if you let it."

"I know."

"You can't control it, it's not..."

"I *know* ," he said tightly, "but it's all I have left of her," he stopped and soaked in the truth of his words, hating that they were true; *masochist* , Alana's voice. Maybe she just couldn't admit the truth he'd tried to tell her, "I can't destroy that."

"She isn't your friend any more dear," Hannah said sagely, "and the longer you let this go on, the more you'll both be consumed by it."

"It's my choice," he mumbled.

"That it is," she said sighing; there was a pause, during which Will decided not to tell her about the dream he'd had the day before, and then, "don't tell me it was in Wallmart again? The last time you made quite a scene. Cooked a whole lotta eggs on the shelves as I recall."

"No," Will snorted a laugh, "no don't worry it wasn't anywhere..." Will remembered the scared patient Lecter had basically carried from his treatment room after he had torn through the door and felt like swallowing the word even as it left his mouth, "public. I'm seeing a psychiatrist," he said, placating.

"Well good, maybe they'll be able to smack some sense into you since I'm too far away to do it myself."

"You'd like him. He's oh so very gentlemanly."

"Is he handsome?" she asked.

"I guess," Will shrugged, rubbing at his neck, unable to stop his mind drifting to *high cheekbones and a long nose ending in cupid's lips.* Stupid, he told himself sternly.

"My, my what a catch," she giggled.

He managed to get her off the phone by promising to visit soon. This time, he thought he might actually mean it. The clock chimed in the back room. Getting up taught him how stiff he was. Will grimaced and tried to work out the kinks. The atmosphere of the room was oppressive, looming. Will looked at the light coming in through the window, the moon full, round and glaring like a spotlight.

It was a quick grind of the herbs and flowers he'd harvested, mixing through with the salt as he muttered under his breath. Cracking a piece of withered Ash from the sticks in his under-stair cupboard Will lit the gas stove and held the wood against the fire until it glowed. He took a handful of his salt mix in his right hand, ash in his left and walked to the front door, staring his perimeter clockwise, he walked, dripping the salt as he did.

"Go mbeidh focail teolaí agat tráthnóna fuar, gealach lán ar oíche dhorcha agus bóthar réidh an bealach ar fad go dtí do dhoras."

The ash smoke was pushed into every corner, smudging out the stagnancy. As he left every room the host of paws followed, looking in but not entering as Will walked. The world seemed to calm as he followed the strict procedure, feeling out the misery and scaring it from its hiding places. Once he was done Will found himself at his front door once again, feeling only marginally better. Turning his back to the world outside Will closed his eyes and brought his hands together in a startling clap. Every grain of salt suddenly but briefly burst into blue flame, leaving behind the smoking herbs to drift up into the air.

He was left staring at the house. The feeling hadn't left; *stranger in his own den.* It nipped at him.

"Fuck it," he growled out.

Reaching down he grabbed the hem of his t-shirt, lifting it up over his head and dropping it to the ground as he started on his belt. Pulling off his socks along with his underwear, Will whistled as he threw opened the door and ran out, followed by the bounding paws of the pack. There, under the moon, Will escaped into the forest, painfully aware that somewhere, maybe then, maybe right at that moment as his feet sank into the snow and he pushed in through the undergrowth, *it was eating*.

"You know, I knew it was only a matter of time. My institute offers a wide range of treatments, much more up to date and reliable than mere psychological interference can offer. Not that there is no merit in one to one sessions but in the case of one so unique as Mr. Graham well, every precaution must be taken. I wasn't lucky enough to be warden when he was last brought here, such a shame, but still, I am more than capable of dealing with a man of his talents."

Jack Crawford was sure he hadn't met anyone in his life that liked the sound of their own voice as much as Frederick Chilton did. But then having worked his way up the FBI food chain, Jack liked to think he had perfected the art of pandering to bureaucracy. It had also taught him the ephemeral nature of his position, especially when the case of a lifetime ended up in his lap. *Make or break*, he told himself, *and I won't break, that's for sure.* This was going to end in promotion or embarrassment, he knew that at least, and the only ace he had was a man he could not rely on.

"Of course," he agreed, "and I am a man who likes to keep his options open. I understand you and Dr. Lecter know each other already?"

“Oh yes, we are acquainted,” Chilton said, smiling broadly from behind his large wooden desk, from a chair that Jack was well aware was set higher than the one he was currently sitting in, “in fact I consider him a friend. We dine together regularly.”

“Well that makes my job a lot easier then,” Jack said, plastering a smile onto his face, “I hope you understand that Will Graham is an asset to my team that I cannot, at this current time, have as a wildcard. If I can have him...compliant, one might say, I’d be willing to allow for any extra little experiments you might want to run. For the sake of furthering our understanding, of course.”

“Of course!” Chilton spread his hands and nodded, “And as a previous client of the institute,” Chilton leaned forwards and laced his fingers together, giving what Jack assumed was the man’s best approximation of sincerity was, “I’m sure he’ll feel right at home.”

The next day Will walked to his barn and unlocked the heavy chain that kept the door secure. Sleep had been deep and true, even if waking on the floor, feet and legs dirty and scraped, surrounded by sleepy paws snuffling in their sleep hadn’t been the most comfortable. One shower and one slice of toast and marmalade later he had sat at his work bench, staring at the boat motor he had been fixing up for the past few weeks.

“What is it?” he asked slowly, no longer seeing the cogs and screws and belts, *seeing deeper, farther, back to the slides in Crawford’s office,* “What is it you follow? What is your design?”

Going to the barn had been his only choice. It had been a while now since he’d opened it. The air was musty inside, the light gloomy. He flicked on the strip lights hanging from the ceiling, flickering everything into life, squinting as he stepped inside and closed the doors. There were motes of dust in the air, stirred up as he walked in. Reaching out he drew his finger over the benches that ran down the left wall, his fingers coming away grey and dusty. Though the cold dry air had certainly helped the botanicals dry out. Clusters of herbs, plants, hanging from string adorned the space above his work tables, scenting the air. Touching the leaves they came away, powder and dust. It was soothing, at the very least, to take them down, unwrapping the twine and grinding down the leaves in the mortar and pestle, cutting up the twigs, separating everything out into small plastic containers and storing them in the racks of storage shelves that trundled down the opposite wall, interwoven with strips of fur sprouting from aged skin hanging from hooks, whole wings from birds strung together and tied in loops. Walking to the back Will washed his hands at the standing tap. There, against the wall, stood the reason he felt he might have been drawn there.

Racks of antlers, all shapes and sizes, bleached yellow-white by time and the sun, hung in solemn contemplation. Roe, red, white-tail, moose, elk, silka, fallow. Some were intimate memories, sacrifices to the hunt. Others were gifts he’d been given when he left Louisiana. Almost all were scored and chipped, scrapings of bone, pieces for charms. The bone was smooth beneath his fingertips.

The great stag in the forest, head thrown back in agony, its wail piercing the night sky. It haunted him, even if the rest of the dream was now nothing but a fuzzy mess of nothingness. *A warning.*

“Forget,” he muttered to himself, “focus.”

Walking away, Will forced himself to clear his mind. In the centre of the barn was a large desk he’d got at a closing down auction at an architect firm. It was tilted, massive, yellow pine; a perfect

surface to keep the truth facing forwards but also tipping away enough that he didn't need to meet it face to face. Taking a minute to gather his resources, slowly but surely, Will began.

Soft, velveteen pressure. Fingertips against his skin, making the hairs rise. A pulling feel suckling at his naval, bringing his world slowly into focus. Sunshine against his eyelids forced them apart, blinking. Will watched the white curtains blow into the room on an unfelt breeze, streaming over his bedsheets, scrolling out into the room, unravelling. The feeling shifted, hotter, sweeter. He felt his hands strain out across the bed, fingers grasping. A gasp of thick, guttural pleasure bubbled up in his throat. The pull deepened, focusing in, down, further, closer. Lifting his head up from the pillow Will clutched at the covers, pulling them down but they seemed to ruffle up, more and more and more until he was struggling, gasping, heart racing, pulling and pulling and *pulling* until suddenly…

...black hands, grasping at his abdomen, curling into claws, ripping runnels across his skin as he choked, panicked, revealing arms leading down between his legs, pulling away the covers to see…

Knocking. Will opened his eyes slowly, groaning.

“Fuck off,” he mumbled, shoving his face into the pillow and trying his best to ignore the straining erection trapped against the mattress.

Will hoped Jack could be patient. He washed himself down quickly and threw on a pair of black jeans and a brown shirt. Hurrying down the stairs, a few of the dogs followed, others still lounging in their beds in the sunshine. As he passed the fireplace he grabbed his glasses and jammed them on, wondering if Jack was going to chew him out or ignore the incident altogether, it was always one or the other. Considering the research he’d done yesterday and sent over with his recommendations, Will hoped it would be the later.

“So am I going to...” the words died in his mouth as he opened the door and looked up.

Lecter was half way down the steps. Turning to look at Will over his shoulder, their eyes caught on each other, barbed. Silence.

“I had reached the assumption that you were not home.”

The air became thick, fidgety. Blinking couldn’t help remove the sudden remembrance of *the man behind him, so close that he was nearly touching*.

“Where’s Crawford?” he ground out, feeling shaky and underprepared.

“I am here at his behest. He asked me to come and speak to you two days ago. However, I thought it more prudent to give you some time to yourself before I started my seige,” Lecter stated, “may I come in?”

Will took a moment before nodding, catching a cough onto the back of his hand and stepping back from the door. Ignoring the eyes that clicked up and down his body was the best option he could think of as Lecter turned, ascended and entered. Will closed the door behind him and sniffed.

“If you’ve come to provide me with a bill, I’m going to warn you it might need to be a payment plan,” Will said as Lecter removed his heavy, navy blue Crombie coat, revealing a brown tartan suit

with pale blue shirt, his paisley tie a swirling mix of the two. His wardrobe was sickeningly coordinated, even down to the bag he was carrying.

“That will not be necessary,” Lecter said as Will offered to hang up his jacket.

“You sure?” he asked, trying to break the tension with a laugh, “because I didn’t get a chance to see your office, but all of the other places looked like bomb sites afterwards.”

“So this has happened before?” Lecter asked; Will felt his mouth thin to a line. Smoothly, the doctor let his eyes swerve away out over his home, “No lasting harm done. Books can be replaced.”

And then the conversation stopped and Will watched, his arms jerking up to wrap around his middle as Lecter simply walked into his home and through into his kitchen. His nerves set his skin alight but with the suddenness of it all he was at a loss. At the sound of cupboards opening Will was startled into action.

“Is there something I can do for you?” he asked angrily as he reached the kitchen door, itching to reach forwards to take away the plates Lecter had found and was putting on the counter.

“I brought breakfast,” Lecter said, reaching down into the bag he had placed on the floor, fishing out two tupperware bowls.

“You brought..? Ok,” Will said, frowning, “why?”

“Because it is breakfast time.”

Will found he couldn’t argue, fidgeted for a moment and then left the kitchen, only to turn straight back around and head in to put the kettle on the stove.

“No need,” Lecter said; Will peered over his shoulder, watching as a tall black flask was produced, perfuming the air with the smell of dark roast.

“I don’t drink coffee.”

“Too bitter?”

“Caffeine doesn’t agree with me.”

“I see. I will need to remember that for the future.”

“The future of what?” Will asked sourly, “Ambushing me?”

“I feel we have that in common,” Lecter said, *again with eyes open, sincere, utterly baffling*. Will blinked fitfully and looked away, “you do not enjoy eye contact?”

“It’s not helpful when I can’t...”

It hit like a brick wall, a car crumpling, all accordioned metal and scrap. For a moment he could listen only to the sound of his own heartbeat, the inhaling of air into his lungs, then out with a rushing exhale, the blood fizzing in his ears. But nothing, *nothing else was there.* Slowly but surely, Will Graham lifted his eyes back to the one place he normally couldn’t stand to put them: right in the path of another’s gaze.

“Will? Is everything alright?” Lecter was asking him calmly.

Nothing, not a flash, not a noise, not a peep from inside his skull. Where normal people had thoughts spewing out of them a mile a minute, images and feelings and noise and bright, hot emotion like someone flicking the remote through channels on a giant, irritating television…here was the one time the screen was off. Hell, he wasn’t sure there even was a screen. When Will tried, out of practice as he was, to dig deeper, to make a connection, to see; *nothing*.

“Yeah,” Will smoothed away his frown and smiled to cover his utter confusion and fear, “everything’s fine.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm using Irish Gaelic, hopefully it's all up to scratch! I know, Louisiana and Irish maybe doesn't gel too well, but my Celtic roots are made happy by it so I'm sticking with it.

'Go bhfásfaidh do fhréamhacha go domhain' - 'May that your roots grow deep'
'Feicimis a chéile faoi soilbhreas' - 'Let us meet in pleasantness'
'Go mBeannaí an bandia tú' - 'May the Goddess bless you'
'Go mbeidh focail teolaí agat tráthnóna fuar, gealach lán ar oíche dhorcha agus bóthar réidh an bealach ar fad go dtí do dhoras' - 'May you have warm words on a cold evening, a full moon on a dark night and a smooth road all the way to your door'

Ambrosia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I need a drink."

"Since when do you drink?" she asked with a wry twist.

"I think this job is pushing me into the sweet arms of alcoholism."

The archives weren't designed for long term study. Except for maybe a study of dust and dragging time, if any were to be made at all. Darkness, lights on timers and brown cardboard framed in metal racking. That they had been down here for the last three hours wasn't helping matters.

"Don't even think about it Graham," she said, throwing her pen at him, hitting him in the chest.

"Aw, you do care," he said, grinning.

"Nope," she shrugged, "just don't want to go through all the hassle that comes with getting a new partner."

"Well, it's always nice to feel wanted," Will said as he pulled the next box down off the stack.

"Yeah well for you I guess that's..."

Yanking the top off the box Will began riffling through, pulling out a fat dossier bound up in string.

"You guess what?" he asked when she didn't continue, "Come on Lass, we're down here because of what you pulled earlier. The least you could do is finish your sentences."

Looking up Will found brown eyes looking down at a sheet of dates and times, a mock up of some complicated looking chart.

"Find something interesting?" he asked, walking over.

She looked up at him and shook her head, smiling, "You know, sometimes I hate your self-deprecating bullshit. It's not constructive and it makes me feel bad."

"I didn't mean..." Will felt his face fall, unsure of what to do.

"You need to have more pride in who you are, ok? And you can't feel bad that your parents..." she seemed to realise just what she was saying and stopped, clearing her throat, "just, you'll always be wanted down here in the dungeons with me."

"Gee, thanks," Will played along, glad to get as far away from her pity as possible, "it's nice to know, considering I think this is going to be our new home until Jack forgives you."

There were crows following them as they drove, he was almost sure of it. He had seen their wings

flickering above, always just out of sight. Black wing tips against the white-cloud sky. After a good twenty minutes' study he began to think it must be a trick of the light out the corner of his glasses. Paranoid, he told himself, although you have every right to be.

"What the hell are you smiling about?" Jack asked as he slowed down to stop at a red light.

"Ever had your own madness validated?" Will asked as a large, black crow landed on the street light to their left, fluttering its sleek feathers; he pointed up at it and raised his brows. Jack just looked back to the road and muttered something Will couldn't catch. They fell back to silence, though Will could feel Jack glancing at him now and then as Will kept his eyes out the window, alert for wings and talons.

"You're looking a little more ethnic recently," he said inappreciatively, looking at the small piece of bone on a leather thong just visible from above the hem of Will's sweater, "What's that around your neck anyway?"

Will looked at him and raised a brow, "I'll tell you if you tell me where we're going."

"You lost it the other day. I can't have that kind of spanner in my works."

"Your guy Zeller has a big mouth..." Will said with quick anger.

"And you're no better," Jack shut him down; Will wanted to snap back but thought better of it, "but I can talk to him. I can't talk to you because you don't listen to a word I say. Never have."

"So what, you going to get a collar and a leash?" Will asked facetiously.

Will didn't appreciate that he got no reply. Taking a breath didn't help, which only made him feel worse. Ever since this had all started again, *since the past became disturbingly like the present*, it had become increasingly difficult to remain calm. The thought of history repeating itself was almost too much.

"Why haven't you been keeping your appointments with Doctor Lecter?" Jack asked suddenly.

"He brought me breakfast the other day. It was weird."

"*He's* the weird one now," Jack said, giving Will the eye, "that's something, coming from you. He told me he tried to contact you for two days and you ignored him until he was forced to turn up on your doorstep."

"Oh yeah? Cause he told me that he was giving *me* space," Will snapped out.

"Bullshit, Graham, I don't appreciate you lying to me. He called, told me you didn't keep your appointment."

"I don't like him. I don't want to see him."

No lights on behind those closed-door eyes. Will remembered the feeling of being shut out completely, and not knowing what was happening, not daring to ask for an explanation . And Lecter had simply watched him, calm, kind and generous, not a hint of anything that should have made Will order him out of his house, tell him to leave, slam the door in his face. But he'd done it anyway.

“Great,” Jack sighed tightly, “then it’s a good thing I set this up.”

Paying so much attention to the wings flying alongside them and being distracted by Jack’s irritating questions, Will had completely lost track of where they were going. Which made it so much worse when he looked out the windscreen to see just which driveway they were rolling along.

The look of a stately home from the outside, all colonnades and fancy brickwork. But the inside was shrunken and cold, pulled down into the only room he was able to see, four grey walls and a bed he could barely stand for the nightmares it brought, the only splash of colour available being the red he’d spilt when he’d chewed through the soft skin at his wrist just so as not to hear her voice any more, ending up in a jacket so tight that it gave him pins and needles, only saved by Alana Bloom walking through his door with the determination of a wolf and the patience of a saint.

He didn’t think Jack saw it coming, and to be truthful Will didn’t think he had much control over his hands as they yanked the car door open and unbuckled his seatbelt, forcing Crawford to slam on his breaks and allow him his escape.

“Will, jesus christ!” Crawford was shouting, scrambling out of the driver door as Will backed away from the hastily stopped car, plumes of dust rising up from the gravel in the cold sun, “You got a death wish Graham, cause I’m not keen on helping you fulfil it!”

“I’m not going in there,” Will was muttering, shaking his head; when Jack started towards him Will shouted, “you can’t just put me back in the box when you think I’m broken Jack, I’m not a fucking toaster oven!”

“You know you’re not making a great case for yourself right now,” Jack said sternly.

“I don’t care,” Will shook his head and grabbed onto the car roof with white knuckles, “you can’t, you’ve got no right!”

“Oh really? After the stunt you pulled at Lecter’s office?”

“He...told you?” Will asked, mortified.

“No, he didn’t. I found out through a formal complaint from the lawyer of another patient of his. For crying out loud Will, I can’t let you work this case while you’re tearing yourself five ways from Sunday, but I *need* you on this with us.”

“Why haven’t you told them?” Will asked suddenly.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Fuck you, Jack, you can lie to them if you want but don’t try and lie to me. It’s the same isn’t it. The same as last time, only worse, right? It’s so much worse, which means this time whoever is pulling off these murders is serious,” Will took a breath and shook his head, “why haven’t you *told* them? You made me sound like a lunatic piece of shit in there last week when I tried to explain about the evidence.”

“You’re asking me why,” Jack said as he locked the car, “when as soon as anyone mentions the Lass case you flip your crazy switch.”

“Only because he..!” Will began to argue, frowning.

“No, I don’t want any more excuses,” Jack shut him down, watching Will steadily, “you want to stay on this case?”

Staring at the large building in front of them as if scared it might reach out and swallow him up at any moment, Will kept his hands on the car so as not to let Jack see that they were shaking, “...You know I do.”

“Then you’re going to walk inside and let them help you,” Jack said.

“Please Jack, I can’t go in there...”

“With a smile and a thank you very much,” Jack continued loudly, “Because if you do not, I’m pulling your temp badge out the system so fast your head will spin. And I doubt it’ll stop there.”

“Are you threatening me?” Will asked slowly, through a tight jaw.

“I’m giving you an ultimatum,” Jack said with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, “but without my protection, I wouldn’t be surprised if you found the director of the Institute petitioning the state to bring you in as part of a case study. With a formal complaint on your record it would be simple. I’ve spoken to him already, he’s very interested to meet you...”

“I’ll speak to Lecter,” Will blurted out; at the very least it seemed to have garnered Jack’s attention, “Ok? I’ll keep my appointments, I’ll be on time, I’ll be...nice,” Will floundered, “I’ll jump through your hoops, I’ll say what you want. Just let me come back to Quantico. I want to make things right. I owe her that much. *You* owe her.”

“Don’t try and pile your shit at my doorstep.”

For the first time in a long time, Will kept his mouth shut and, with even greater difficulty, looked up into Jack’s eyes, holding the stare. It was easy to catch the thoughts that floated close to the surface without anyone noticing.

Remembering Miriam Lass as a little green recruit, all verve and vigour and a need to do right. Her eyes had been so open and bright it hurt him to see it. It always hurt to see the light go out once the work started, once they saw the darkness of the world. Jack hated that.

It was a pure memory, only now it was tinged with guilt. Jack was the first to look away, sighing with a nod. Getting back into the car, the relief was palpable. Watching the image of the Institute retreating as they reversed, Will sank down into his chair and gripped his thighs.

“And in case you need telling,” he said as Jack pulled round to head back to the highway, “if you ever bring me back here again, it’ll be the last time you ever see me,” the silence spread out too long, and Will felt his lips jerk into a deprecating smile, “now that I think about it that might not be much of a threat.”

“Will, would you shut that fool mouth of yours, just for a little while?” Jack asked, answering his phone, “Crawford. No, not this time, if you could cancel. I understand, please give my apologies, I know he was kind enough to see us last minute. Thank you.”

Biting at his thumb nail, Will reached out with his pinky finger and stroked the piece of bone at his throat, closing his eyes in a silent thank you.

“You were on the phone, Director, I’m so sorry I...”

“Then next time, come in and fucking *get* me Pam!” Chilton yelled at the lanky redhead fussing on the rug in his office, “Do you have any idea what this opportunity means to us? Now how about you make yourself useful,” he said, baring his teeth, “and get me some god damned coffee!”

She hurried too quickly, running against the door before fumbling it open, her eyes full of tears.

Frederick Chilton fell back in his chair, letting it sway as he fumed. Why couldn’t anything ever go his way, just for once? Every time something presented itself as a boon in his life, it came with a caveat. Now, Jack Crawford had dangled the one thing he wanted right in front of his face like a rabbit on a snare line, only to untie the wire just as he got close enough to taste the thrill.

Waking up his laptop with a click of a mouse, he pressed his fingerprint on the track pad and logged in, bringing up the pages he had been looking at before his rude awakening. With his other hand he pulled out the disposable mobile he kept in his pocket, dialling. After ten rings, during which he had pulled up the pictures of Graham from his trial, it was finally answered.

“Hello there, is he home? Thank you honey,” he asked sweetly as he stared at the dark eyes of the man who had slipped through his fingers, waiting for the one man that might be able to salvage this mess, “Hobbs. Get it done.”

Hanging up, Chilton threw the phone onto his desk and pulled out his personal cellphone, typing a quick message, allowing himself to shake off the negative and trust in himself. Things always turned out in the end.

Only a day since he’d returned, and already he was finding things to hate about Jack Crawford’s shitty sense of humour. Or worse, the fact that he didn’t even remember at all. Not in the way Will did.

“I can’t believe it,” Will shook his head, on his knees to look under the table, and let out an incredulous but fond chuff of laughter, “it’s still there. Something tells me the only thing that would convince them to replace the furniture in this place would be a fire.”

“Well, I’m glad one of us is happy,” Beverly said as she surveyed the misery that was the archives; Will's smile stuttered out as he rubbed at his neck, “I’m hair and fibre, Graham. Archives isn’t really my scene, so if we could get to this I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure,” he blinked awkwardly, pulling himself up and rubbing the dust from his knees, “lets go then.”

“So,” she said as she yanked a pull cord and lit up a set of racking, “I’ll take Jan and Feb, you take May and April.”

“Ok,” Will nodded.

Falling into a synergy with another person, even if he couldn’t count her as a friend, was at least something. Beverly Katz, he was finding out quickly, was an open minded, independent individual. If he were to encapsulate her in one word, he’d probably say she was impartial. She didn’t accept

him, but she certainly didn't seem to hate him in the way Zeller did, and at a time like this he'd be thankful for small mercies.

"So," she called from a couple of racks over, "what'd you write on the table? Something dirty?"

Will smiled softly and shook his head even though he knew she couldn't see it, "No. Just..." thinking about it made the smile all the more fond, "the sort of thing you write when you've been down here three days in a row."

"Oh yeah?" Beverly sounded jaded already, "Didn't know that was possible. Is it 'kill me now'?"

Finding what he was looking for, Will reached in and retrieved the box he needed, finding it surprisingly light. When he walked back Beverly was already dumping her second heavy looking box; she looked at his and put her hand on her hip, gesturing to him, "typical, I always pick the wrong side of the coin."

"We'll split it," Will indicated to one of her boxes, then stopped, looking up at her through his lashes, "well?"

"Well what?"

Reaching under the table he tapped at the old message and raised a brow. After a moment Beverly smiled wryly, before hunkering down and putting her head underneath, her long hair bouncing. Will sat down and enjoyed the sound of her laugh. It was musical, but understated, like she didn't use it too often.

"Jack Crawford is an asshole," she said as she re-emerged, "not very imaginative."

"I wasn't feeling very imaginative when I wrote it," Will shrugged.

Lying on the floor, knowing he was getting crap in his hair, but unable to stop laughing because Miriam was lying like his mirror-twin, head beside his, saying the words out loud as he uncorked the marker and wrote them, both of them in hysterics by the time he'd finished.

For a moment he thought he could smell the heady scent of marker pen. He watched Beverly climb up into a chair opposite his and open her first box. Suddenly feeling a little less jubilant about being back in a place that his memories liked to haunt, Will followed suit.

"Shouldn't we be able to do this from the database?" Beverly asked as she sat with a manilla folder open in her hands, "This is going to be hella time consuming."

"Already tried," Will shrugged, "nothing came up flagged for organ removal, any signs of ritual significance, occult iconography or signs that wasn't just dumb kids or wannabes. There must have been something we missed, or maybe we'll be unlucky and whoever did the missing murders was better at disposing of corpses than their counterparts."

"*If* there are others," she said, looking up at him.

"Right," Will bit his tongue and nodded, "if."

Time flowed long and slow in the deadened, noiseless room, only the buzzing of the lights above to break up the monotony. *Triple homicide in a bar, shooting . Kidnapping case, teenage girl, still*

missing. Will began to feel doubt creeping up on him as every case that passed by his fingers laughed at his theory, at his only chance of this being the same as last time. His only chance.

Then…

“Hey,” he said, flicking his head up and looking to Beverly, eyes coming to rest on her chin, “do you have any arson cases there?”

“Arson? Uh, yeah actually I have two,” Will stood up and walked around the table, “a warehouse in south docks, and a residential area, family home. Mum and two kids, all three deceased,” she handed him the file when he asked, “what are you looking for?”

The pictures were standard, *all charred, all black, all burned into his mind as he looked*. Will swallowed and skipped past to the autopsy report, eyes narrowing, then back to the fire fighter's report. He put it down in front of Beverly, open, and then put his own next to it.

“I have one too.”

“Yeah, I see that,” she said, clearly asking for an explanation.

“They’re similar. Don’t you think so?”

“Uh,” Beverly scanned them both, shrugging, “I suppose. I mean, most arson cases are when they involve homicide right? But there are big differences here, look. One started in the garage after a break in, the other there was no break in so the perp had a key. One was a lone male in his twenties, the other mother and two kids. The districts are really far apart, Will, I don’t know what you’re...”

“Ok, I hear you, but listen for a minute,” Will butt in, ignoring her inscrutable look, “it’s not what’s different that interests me. Here, in the report the fire fighters on both cases say that the accelerant was placed away from the bedrooms, the fires started downstairs.”

“That’s normal...”

“But that there were traces of accelerant in the bedrooms too,” Will said, pointing, “the bodies burned so hard that there was barely anything left,” Will pulled out a couple of the photos, showing the charred skeletons of the victims, like charcoal mimicries, “they attribute it to their clothing but, hell, I can’t think of anything that would...I think they were already dead.”

“That’s a leap,” she said.

“Their fire alarms were in working order, both,” Will said, “How many arson cases have you seen where no one gets out of bed when the smoke alarm goes off?” Will asked significantly, watching Beverly look down, a faint sign of interest in her eyes, “Not even a body on the stairs or near a door trying to get out.”

“Could have been smoke inhalation? Maybe the fire didn’t start right away and the detector didn’t go off until everyone was already knocked out.”

“That’s a pretty big ask,” Will said, “think about it, this would be a great way to dispose of the evidence if there were organs missing from their corpses.”

“...I suppose,” Beverly said, sitting forwards and lifting her hands before putting them down on her knees, “but it would be another completely different MO than any of the other murders we have for

this case."

"Would that really surprise you?" Will asked, catching her eye.

Intrigue, wariness, blooming interest, pity.

Beverly's feelings were a fifty-fifty goodie bag of nasty and nice. Will looked away quickly and shoved his hands in his pockets so that he could close the connection. Beverly was eyeing him as if she wanted to say something but, just then, a phone started to ring. Thanking whoever needed thanked Will checked his cell, looking to Beverly as she too pulled out hers and checked. They both read the message and sagged.

"I hate to say I told you so," Will muttered bitterly as he stared at the stark words on the screen, '*There's been another. My office, five minutes. Crawford'*.

The forest was singing to her. Light through the leaves, the green shining with the life growing inside. The dirt beneath her feet full of worms and the ever rolling decay that fed the trees, the plants. Above a jay flew down, so close she thought she felt its wing beats. It brought a startled laugh to her lips, happiness in her fingers as she brought them to her mouth. It was a sort of peace, that was what the woman in town had told her, to commune with the living things. Of course taking the truck and sneaking off had also been part of the rush. A feeling of utter independence that spoke to her soul, like the birds that flew up into the air.

"*Abigail!*"

The call sent her shivering, eyes scattering through the trees, desperate. Again the call came, kicking her into gear. The running was easy, but the destination was difficult. *Where are you going to go?* She asked herself, feeling the panic welling. She didn't want it, it wasn't fair of him to ask her to. It wasn't fair to trap her like an animal, make her do what he said.

"Abigail! Girl where you at?"

Closer now, so close she knew he must be able to see her. Yet she didn't stop running, wouldn't stop until there was no other option but to submit.

He imagined, when he could allow himself to see past the blood, the gouges in the floor, the broken furniture and the misery spattered like falling stars across the walls, that it could be pretty nice here. What did they call it again, he thought, a fixer upper? They weren't far from the stream, enough that he couldn't just hear the water but taste the clarity of it on his tongue. It gave the whole area a lightness, a humidity that made the plants grow tall.

The house itself wasn't anything to write home about, all peeling wallpaper and mould in the corners. It spoke of another's love, someone else who had owned this place long ago and had loved it, taken over by another who didn't love themselves enough to look after it. Reaching out, he picked up a picture from the mantelpiece. It felt odd through the nitrile gloves. *A boy and a woman, her hair ratty but her smile large, teeth showing; the boy was nothing more than seven, family resemblance obvious*. This far out into the middle of nowhere, it spoke of someone wanting to hide.

“Same MO as the last,” Zeller was saying as he set down another yellow marker blazoned with the number fifteen and took a photograph; Will wondered if Zeller had even been to a crime scene where he’d run out of markers to put against evidence.

“Even down to the number of points on the pentagram,” Will said sarcastically as he gestured to the wall.

Zeller didn’t reply, but Will could tell he wanted to. It was sudden and rash, but Will couldn’t fully feel guilty as he watched the young man hunkered down on the floor as he set the flash on the camera. Staring deep, concentrating, letting his defences down.

Holding her tight, the feral feeling light and hot and lush in a way he couldn’t understand or even try and care to. Her hair like flames, her body like silk, all strawberries and cream beneath him, surrounding him. When she smiled he thought he might let himself fall, just for tonight.

“*Graham*,” Jack’s voice pulled him from Zeller’s thoughts; Will looked over, blasé, “eyes on the prize, not anywhere else.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said with a mock salute, unable to stop smirking.

“So, what are we thinking?” Jack asked even as Brian scratched an itch at his head, looking suspicious.

“Definite breaking and entering,” Beverly said as she walked to the door, looking very different with her hair pulled up in a bun and swallowed in Tyvek, “lock was pretty lame to begin with though. Wouldn’t have taken much.”

“And he put up a fight,” Zeller said, standing up to indicate to the upturned table, deck chairs all folded up and bent, runnels gouged into the floor.

“Of course he did,” Will said as he walked to the cowboy booted feet of the dead man and cocked his head as he looked at his eviscerated corpse, “what werewolf doesn’t put a fight?”

In a way he was beginning to enjoy the silences that followed after he said almost anything these days, they were peaceful if nothing else. Part of him wished this one would go on forever, allow him to listen to nothing but the stream behind the house gurgling and the breeze in the trees rustling.

“And how would you explain that?” Jack asked, breaking the calm.

“Really?” Will frowned, running his top teeth over his bottom lip as he looked up at Jack, “what man do you know who could take a deck chair,” he pointed to one of the mangled twists of metal, “and not only turn it into a pretzel, but also,” he leaned down to point out the filed down edge of the metal, caught with strips of wood, “use it to dig two inches down into a solid wood floor. Also the whole place stinks of wet dog.”

“Maybe he’s got a *dog* then,” Zeller said facetiously.

“The only thing in this room that looks new on the walls is a calendar that includes the phases of the moon,” Will said, barely resisting rolling his eyes.

Lifting his right hand Will shook it at the deceased, all tanned skin torn open below his bearded face.

“I’d take it, two to one, that he has marks on his gums. Right where his canines are. Indents, big ones.”

He wasn’t the only one to notice that Beverly was giving him an appreciative look. Will had seen it before. Not everyone disliked his methods, especially when they yielded results. She squatted down next to the man and opened his mouth, peering inside.

“I’ll be damned,” she said, leaning back to let Will see.

“The canines are the last part to reform after the transformation,” she said, “the gums always suffer. So, where do I pick up my winnings?” Will asked smugly.

“I think I preferred you when you were crazy,” Zeller said flatly.

“Oh I can be both,” Will shrugged, this time unable to resist the urge to roll his eyes when Jack opened his mouth, “alright, alright, I’ll play nice. Now that was the first course, if you leave I can get you the rest,” Will said as he began stripping the left blue glove from his hand, rubbing away the powdery residue.

“No.”

One word that stopped everything. Will looked up, confused, and even more so when Beverly was the first to speak out.

“Come on boss,” she said, “this is important.”

“...Give us a minute,” Jack said; when no one moved he glared, “*now*.”

Watching the room empty felt like being stripped of his armour. Being in a room alone with someone wasn’t his favourite thing, especially when said other person was not only law enforcement but also a man with more control over him than he cared for. The door closed with a click, and Will self-consciously put his hands in his pockets.

“If you don’t like my methods,” Will said slowly, barely restraining the venom, “then why’d you fucking hire me?”

“Because you’re a good profiler, Will,” Jack said, snapping out his diction, “and you have skills that even you can’t explain, *ah* don’t deny it,” Jack held up his hand when Will opened his mouth to protest, “but the last thing I need to go on file in this case is god damned necromancy. It was difficult enough to explain away the last time.”

“You had to explain it away?” Will asked incredulously, “How the fuck did you manage that?”

“None of your damned business...” Jack said authoritatively, fading to nothing as he caught Will’s eye, caught and held because Will was watching him intensely.

Fingers typing, sweat caught in his collar, knowing that if he did it carefully enough there would be no inconsistency in the evidence log, because saying that the drawing of the creature Will had seen had been found at the victim’s house was far easier than trying to explain where it had really come from. This was too important to lose it now.

“You *falsified* my evidence?” Will breathed out, shocked.

What happened next reminded Will the other reason he hated being alone in a room with someone. Crawford took the room in three strides. Trying to back up, the sudden wave of fear made Will clumsy, trip, fall against the wall. Will let out an aborted cry that was silenced by a gloved hand over his mouth, the other grabbing his right hand and crushing tight enough to twist skin. He had always noticed how much larger Crawford was than him, but had never really thought, not that it would matter, not that it would ever come to...

Will had always been lean, wiry. Jack had the build of a football player, all wide chest and shoulders and a muscular physique that pinned him with ease. The man’s eyes were coldly livid as they stared into him. The smell of Jack's leather glove was heady and suffocating against his nose.

“I doubt I need to tell you this Graham,” Jack’s voice was deceptively calm, considering all that radiated out was *anger, rage, fear, ANGER, RAGE, FEAR*, as he pressed his face close and spoke low and steady, “but if I catch you going into my head, even if I just *suspect* that you’re poking around where you’re not wanted,” his grip tightening, pulling a muffled curse out against his palm, “you’ll be going to the cells in the Institute that people need to take an elevator down to visit, you get me?” he waited until Will nodded, “I’m doing this to protect us, to protect *you*. Maybe you’d do best to think about that before you mouth the fuck off.”

On being released Will nearly fell, catching himself against one half of the broken table. Steadying himself, Jack turned away, rubbing at his mouth and shaking his head. It was difficult to quantify the fear rushing through his veins, adrenaline high like a perfume making him giddy. When he looked down to his wrist to see the livid red marks there he let out a laugh, curt and cut off. Watching Jack turn to look at him, frowning only made it worse. The laughter came with bright eyes, squinting and a pain in his gut.

“You’re not right in the head,” Jack was saying, eyes to the ceiling as if asking for help.

“Rich,” Will managed to get the word out past the laughing fit, the wide smile stopping his face from falling, “that’s real rich coming from you, Jack.”

“Just keep your mouth shut and maybe we’ll all get through this in one piece.”

Will hurried from the house as the adrenaline began to drop out, his hands shaking, his smile faltering. He kept his eyes on his truck and strode across the overgrown yard, all long grass and car parts.

“Hey, you ok?” Beverly’s voice from somewhere to his right.

“Got an appointment,” Will managed to say, keeping his eyes forward.

It was three miles down the road before he saw red so thick and caustic that it forced him to pull over, get out and kick seven hells out of his tire with swings hard enough that, he knew from the sound they made when they connected, it would be enough to leave Crawford unrecognisable after only a few, solid blows.

This time around, Will allowed himself time to admire the intricate little touches to Hannibal Lecter’s waiting room that he hadn’t had the wherewithal to appreciate last time he’d been through.

It was a calming space, the green walls complementing wooden floorboards and the worn but authentic looking rug beneath his feet had a homely but stately feel to it. He was just about to get up and take a closer look at the Japanese prints on the wall above the credenza when the door opened. Will stiffened, suddenly worried that he would see Lecter's patient, the woman with the worried eyes and the abusive husband that he really, really couldn't deal with right now. Instead…

"Mr. Graham," Lecter was alone, holding open the door as an offering; today seemed to be feisty, Will thought derisively, if the man's dark grey and crimson red check suit was anything to go by, "you are early."

"Then why'd you come and get me?" Will asked, prickly, picking up his jacket as he stood.

"It would be terribly rude of me to leave you here when I am free. Please, come in."

The instinctive need to stay away from the man collided with having to walk past him through the doorway. Will kept his eyes away from those that watched him as he entered, walking out into the expansive room. He didn't remember much of it, just flashes. Not the cloister-like bottom floor, all scalloped archways hiding artwork and sculptures alike, nor the upper floor which held a library all of its own, accessed by a lean and tall ladder at the far wall. The curtains he did remember, as a backdrop to the fiasco, all white and red stripes. They were half drawn, giving the room a cavernous feel, gloomy and tranquil.

"May I?"

Will only just managed to switch his startled gasp for a swift inhale as he turned to find Lecter standing next to him, not close enough to make him angry, but not far enough away to be pleased about it either. His skin still stung at his wrist, and his senses were on high alert. Lecter was holding out his hand and it took Will a moment to realise what the man wanted.

"...Thanks," he said as he offered his jacket; Lecter took it and hung it on an ornate stand by the entranceway.

"So," Lecter said as he walked past the desk Will intimately remembered devastating on his last visit, towards the twin, low black leather chairs which faced each other, "should we continue where we left off?"

"I..." Will stopped, closing his mouth and breathing out through his nose, closing his eyes until he felt calmer, "I want to apologise, for my behaviour."

"Oh?" Lecter said; when Will opened his eyes the man was watching him, *staring directly at him.*

Blinking didn't help, and looking away only made him feel like a coward. Will grit his teeth and continued, unable to stop his tone from souring.

"I wrecked your office."

"And you have already apologised for it once before," Lecter pointed out.

"Well now I'm doing it again," Will said, "and for throwing you out of my house. I shouldn't have, I just wasn't ready to...I'm not used to having guests in my home."

"Will."

And it was odd at first, and then sickening in a way he couldn't explain. *That one word, his name, said so carefully*. It pulled his gaze back like a challenge. Lecter stood like a statue, all angles and lines that looked as if they had been chosen for their artistic merit, to highlight and accentuate. His form was intoxicatingly perfect, and it itched at him. Will felt sullied and chaotic in comparison.

"What?" he asked confrontationally.

"I am going to ask a favour of you, and in return you may ask one of me, whenever you like," Lecter smiled, an infinitesimal quirk at the corners of his mouth, "would you please come and sit with me? I find standing consults to be rather tiring, and I have had a long day."

The tip of his tongue was desperate to rasp out something nasty, something scathing, but then the reminder of Jack's threat, *of that long driveway leading up to the one place he refused to go*, held him in check. Swallowing down the feeling of his skin crawling, Will stepped slowly forwards, taking a seat as Hannibal did. The man crossed his legs and sat back comfortably, as if he belonged in the chair as a birthright. On the other hand Will couldn't bring himself to completely comply, sitting forwards, hands clasped, elbows on his thighs.

"Thank you," Hannibal said.

"Anytime," Will said bitterly, frowning as Lecter produced a sheet of paper that he leaned forwards to offer; Will hesitated before accepting it, looking down, "what is this?"

"Your psychological evaluation," Lecter said, drawing Will's sharp glance, "you're mainly functional and more or less sane. Well done."

"You're joking right?" Will said flatly, the hysterical need to laugh trying to bubble up again, emerging only as a shaky, self-deprecating smile, "Do you really think a magic rubber stamp is going to convince anyone of that? With all respect, you'd only be doing your reputation a damage if you gave this to Jack Crawford."

"You can let me worry about my professional reputation," Lecter said, tilting his head marginally to the left, "I always feel that an employer's expectations create a barrier to important issues. Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing he can rely on you and our conversation can proceed unobstructed by paperwork."

"I thought we stipulated no lying," Will said seriously, eyeing the man.

"I am not lying to *you*," Lecter clarified; Will's smile dissolved to a frown, "and for Jack this is not so much a blatant falsehood as it is a..." he searched for the words, "promise of future outcomes."

"You're giving Jack Crawford a promissory note in lieu of my sanity?" Will asked incredulously, eyes narrow, "A little presumptuous isn't it?"

"I don't think so," Lecter said with such blatant confidence that, once again, Will couldn't think of a come back.

As the evening had deepened the room had continued to darken with it. Part of him wished to ask for a light on, something to illuminate their situation; the other part was enjoying the dim shadow covering everything, only the faint light of the setting sun casting a glow into the room.

“So,” he said when Lecter wasn’t forthcoming, “if that’s all?” Will stood suddenly, making Lecter raise his brows marginally.

Turning to march towards the doorway Will could feel the tension in his legs, in his arms, in his fingers as they curled into the thick, expensive paper. *Putting his back to the man sent the hairs on his arms on end, the thought of not seeing the man coming, not knowing...*

“A promise takes work,” Lecter said, stopping him in his tracks, “we both know there is no magic rubber stamp, as you put it. No cure to the curse that haunts you.”

The gloom seemed to sink down across his mind, over his body. He thought he could hear his own rhythm, his body finding it hard to cope. No one knew, no one but his Matron knew. Coincidence, that’s all, he tried to tell himself, it’s just a word, it’s just a coincidence that he used *that word*.

“What did you say?” Will asked breathily, looking over his shoulder.

“The umbra of it, following you like a double, tracing your footsteps,” Lecter was talking casually as if they were merely discussing the weather, “I hate to think you would despise yourself so much as to tolerate something so destructive.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Will ground out, heart beating loudly in his chest.

“I wish we could get past these pleasantries,” Lecter said openly, reaching out with his hand to once more offer a seat, “because from what I have seen you have shown a desperate intelligence trapped beneath the shame of your sui generis,” Will could hear the words, but his eyes were trained on the lips that said them, watching, waiting, for a sign of falsity that refused to come; Hannibal Lecter stared at him without compunction or censure, “I would like to know you, Will, if you would let me.”

Walking back to his chair was a long road. Every step asked him a question: *Don’t you want to leave? Who would want to know you? Aren’t you afraid? Isn’t this all futile in the end?* He knew it would be. Anyone who knew him well enough to call him friend ended up miserable in the end. Or dead. Sitting down made him feel complicit.

“So how does this work?” he said sourly, refusing to let the man have it easy, “You going to ask me lots of probing questions about my shitty childhood?”

“If you like,” Lecter said, “though I thought it would be more prudent to talk about more pressing issues. I believe you have troubles at work.”

“I wont talk about her,” Will said suddenly, finding the courage to look into Lecter’s eyes and hold the stare, “don’t waste your breath asking.”

“Actually I was referring to the new developments in your current case,” Lecter said.

Clearing his throat at least filled the silence. Maybe one was just as bad as the other, he thought. Was it any easier to talk about Lass than it was the multitude of the other people he’d been unable to save? Was it any easier to talk about his dead friend than it was to admit his own weakness, his own fears about the prejudice that threatened him on a daily basis. Will wished that it could be true.

“Things are escalating faster than we expected,” Will shrugged, “no one in the department is ok with it, it’s affecting everyone.”

“But not everyone is so intimately involved with the process,” Lecter rationalised, “you go where others don’t.”

“I see what the evidence shows me.”

“And what others show you?”

Stiffening in his chair, Will tried to control his tells and failed miserably. Taking a breath he felt his eyes scatter out across the room.

“Who told you that? Not Jack, that’s for sure.”

“I have many sources outwith your charming FBI counterparts,” Lecter said, “You are cagey of your talents.”

“Wouldn’t you be? Communing with the dead doesn’t generally attract praise. It attracts pitchforks.”

“You dislike this part of yourself.”

“What the hell has this got to do with my work?” Will asked.

“No lies, Will,” Lecter said, “I include omission in that umbrella of transgressions.”

“...It’s difficult to be validated in your theories when it is at the cost of human life,” Will said after a moment’s pause; Lecter waited for him to continue, “the only way to know that you’re right is to wait for another body to show. I don’t enjoy it, but I think that’s how people see me. They think that practicing magic makes me destined for hell.”

“And you disagree?”

“I don’t believe in hell. This life’s bad enough as it is. If it were to get any worse it would be a really sick joke.”

“So when you dispatched your intruders, you threw them into the void. No chance at eternity.”

“I only killed one of them,” Will said strictly, “and I wasn’t exactly contemplating their metaphysical destiny when I did it.”

“It was instinct, then,” Lecter said.

The word bit at him in the way a scared dog does: not maliciously but for protection.

“Instinct is a...it’s difficult.”

“A word to cover a multitude of sins?”

“Yes,” Will agreed, eyes shifting over Lecter’s face, finding no mockery there, “I’d say my status as a wiccan makes my life a scrambled mess, but to tell the truth I think I’d be like this even without the stigma. I...”

Will sighed, fed up of hesitating every time he tried to force a truthful word out of his mouth.

“This case is familiar, and I’m not sure I can control my reactions to that. I can’t go down that rabbit hole again,” Will was amazed he could admit it aloud; even with Jack all they could manage with each other was threats. Somehow this, here, was different. He just couldn’t tell quite why yet.

“Guilt is a powerful emotion.”

“So is fear.”

“Our fears make us cruel.”

“I’m well aware,” Will muttered out, rubbing at his shirt cuff, feeling the bruised skin beneath, “I just want to, I don’t know,” Will stopped, “this is a chance to make up for my mistakes. Maybe that makes me reckless.”

“I would exchange it for pragmatic.”

“Then more fool you,” Will said, one brow raised; when Lecter didn’t react Will sat forwards again, his *instinct* trying for something shocking. The man before him was too collected for this sort of sordid information. Part of him wished to see it crumble, “I watched him die, the man who came into my home.”

Lecter didn’t move a muscle except to marginally raise his head, eyes never leaving Will’s.

“Yet you do not consider him your victim.”

“I don’t like to consider him at all.”

“Tell me Will, is it harder imagining the thrill somebody else feels killing now that you've done it yourself?”

That he found himself answering genuinely would shock him as he thought back to his session later that night. At the time, Will answered without compunction.

“It’s not the first time I’ve killed.”

“I see,” Lecter said; Will curled his fingers into fists and pressed his fingernails into his palms a couple of times before relaxing. It was difficult not to be irritated that Lecter refused to react, but then Will could marginally accept that it was the man’s job to be contrite and calm at all times, regardless of the conversation, “then you consider yourself a killer?”

“Yes,” Will said candidly.

Lecter’s eyes seemed to shift, and then in one smooth motion the man uncrossed his legs and sat forwards, mirroring Will’s stance.

“Self defence generally precludes a killing, it is a preservation method.”

“I didn’t do it in self defence,” Will said, shocked at the ease with which the words were coming out of his mouth; he licked at his bottom lip and wished he could have held to his conviction not to talk about this. Looking down at his hands Will wished he could think of something else, anything else, “I need to call in that favour, Doctor Lecter.”

“Of course.”

“Can we...not talk about this right now?”

“You do not need to ask as a favour. I am not here to interrogate you. Everything you tell me is in the strictest confidence.”

“I know, I just don’t want to, right now so,” he took a deep breath, “thank you.”

“Never feel the need to thank me, Will. I think that will be enough for our first session. No need to burn out too quickly.”

Will found himself nodding as Lecter stood to turn on a lamp by his chaise lounge. He squinted at the sudden glare before standing up, picking up the psych evaluation Lecter had gifted him. Reckless, he told himself, doesn’t even cover what you just told him does it. This man, Will thought as he watched Lecter from the corner of his eye as he went about turning on the lights all around his office, who he did not know from Adam. Who set his alarm bells ringing, even if he couldn’t explain why. Who put him off his guard with his open confidence and his attentive observations.

This man whose thoughts were closed to him, utterly and completely.

Which, if you were to tell yourself the truth, is starting to intrigue you more than scare you.

As Will walked over to get his jacket he found Lecter there already, holding the garment for Will to put on. He watched the man carefully, nerves on edge, all still too close to the violence to chance the kindness.

“Why are you so desperate to get near me, when I’ve made it quite fucking clear I don’t want you to?” Will asked angrily.

“That’s a question I have also been asking of myself lately,” Lecter said, offering Will his jacket before retracting his hand and lacing his fingers together, “you exude a particular air. Wounded animals have it, a certain quiver to them. It is distinct in the way a fingerprint is. Everyone’s trauma is unique. Yours draws succour to it, like a lamb to slaughter.”

“What,” Will said drolly, “because you think I’m going to bleed over your pretty office with my feelings again and ruin your book collection?”

“Because you attract what you cannot have, and then reject it out of hand because the very thought of it terrifies you.”

Will stared at him, mouth opening to rebuke but the words wouldn’t come. Taking a deep breath he jammed his arms into his jacket, shrugging it on roughly.

“And here I thought psychiatrists were supposed to get you to come to your own conclusions.”

“There are times when only blunt force trauma can assist, when patients purposefully blind themselves. I feel it is my duty to point out the chasms you cannot cross, before you fall into them.”

It was surprising to watch the man leave with such grace, considering he appeared, to all intents and purposes, ready to explode. Perhaps already had. Hannibal waited to hear the door to the

waiting room close, and then the one beyond that which exited to the main hallway, before he turned and walked to the low slung black chair he always insisted his patients took. It was intoxicating, bewilderingly so; the closer he stepped the stronger it got. The fear made it sweet, but there was something more, something else beyond the base human emotions, something that spoke to him like an old memory, reached down inside of him and touched timidly, gently, at the core of his being.

Standing behind the chair Hannibal placed both hands on the back, leaned down and put his nose against the leather where Will Graham's neck had rested, inhaling deeply. *A scent with the dizzying quality of smoke, sinking down into his lungs like a euphoric elixir. Dragging in a second breath it was impossible to keep his mouth from juddering open, teeth bared, eyes clouding. It was sultry, perfect and deeply erotic.*

On regaining his senses, Hannibal unflexed his fingers, realising that the leather of the chair where they had been was rather irreparably torn. He made a small, irritated noise in his throat and stood, smoothing down his tie and slipping the hair that had fallen down onto his forehead back into place.

“So much for remaining impartial,” he said to himself.

He shouldn’t have dug it out, he knew that. Shouldn’t have even kept it in the first place. It had been the one out of the dozens that he’d emptied down the sink, and now it was the one that mocked him because it knew he’d never be able to hold up his end of the promise. Knew it had been kept because he wasn’t strong enough to resist. Will sneered at the bottle of bourbon and shook it, watching the amber liquid slosh and froth.

“I don’t care what you think,” Will said to the bottle, unscrewing it and pouring a messy glass, which turned into a messy *large* glass, which turned into three messy large glasses. By the time Will was done, there was only a third of the amber spirit left filling the, now mainly clear, bottle.

“What m’I?” Will was asking no one; the dogs had all trotted off to bed upstairs, whether out of tiredness or a need to get away from his ranting he wasn’t sure, “A fucking two dollar mystic from a parlour above the Wallgreens, here to pander to his fucking...fucking tricks when he wants them?” grabbing the chalk in unsteady fingers, “Fucking prick. Fucking *pricks* the lot of them,” he slurred.

Should have been difficult to draw but, even drunk, Will could pull off a mean summoning circle. He giggled to himself as his bourbon sloshed onto the floorboards when he leaned back to draw an anti-clockwise spiral of rebirth at the head of the circle. Then another, a triskéle; after removing his necklace with a bit of difficulty, Will placed the bone on the symbol, staring for longer than he should have until he felt the sadness creeping up on him. Shaking his head, he growled and leaned out of the circle to put his drink down and pick up the photograph he shouldn’t have. The one he’d stolen from the file Beverly had left lying on her desk.

The man whose name he refused to learn because he was fed up putting names to faces of corpses with their insides missing.

The photo was placed in front of him, humming out a high pitched note of its own. Leaning forwards on his knees, Will placed his hands flat against the sides of the photograph and concentrated as best he could. In the corner a lamp buzzed, flickering.

“They took your tongue,” Will said carefully, feeling the vibration in the air, like the deep, low note of a cello, “as a symbol of your silence. Spiorad na foraoise, oscail mo shúile. Lig an veil a tharraingt ar leataobh,” the fumes on his breath took on an altogether different sort of intoxicating, *feeling like the oracle at Delphi, drinking deep of the sulphurous vapours*, “no way to pass over, no hand to guide. If you have anything you want to tell me, now would be the time. Biotáillí dorcha, lig don phasáiste seo dul tríd,” as he picked up the ceremonial dagger and cut through the pad of his middle finger, scrawling a symbol onto the photograph in his own blood, a sparking ping filled the air and the bulb in the light shattered, casting the room into darkness.

Pitch black. Sitting back, Will sighed and shook his head. Hadn’t worked. What the hell are you thinking? He asked himself, and you wonder why Jack is scared of you. Not that he cared any more what anyone thought of him. *Liar*, he cursed himself. It was difficult to think what maroon eyes and cupids lips would say if they saw him now. Will tried not to think about the man whose opinion he found haunting him.

Then the glow. At first it was nothing but a soft light, like the winking of a firefly on a summer night. Then it grew, lighting the photograph from behind like an artist’s table. And above, barely lit, barely visible, the man sat cross legged, face hung forwards, his long black hair hiding almost all of his features. Only his mouth remained in view, lips stained rust red. Will breathed out and then in again quickly, letting it out slow. Swallowing he stayed still. The last thing he wanted was to leave the circle.

“What’s your name?”

The spirit stayed perfectly motionless. Will followed suit, slowing his breathing, trying to focus through the haze of alcohol and darkness.

“Tá cead agat,” he said patiently, “what is your name.”

“...they called me Mike. Michael,” the lips moved independently, as if there was a delay; behind the lips was the cavern of a tongueless mouth. Will wondered just how far gone he was but dismissed it out of hand.

“Mike. Let me be your tongue. I can speak for you.”

“I can’t find my way home,” the man said, gruff voice holding a hint of tears, “it’s dark. I can’t find my way.”

“I know,” Will nodded, guilt seeping in, “I know. I can help you, but I need you to tell me something first...”

“I just want to go *home*,” the spirit said tightly, lip quivering as he lifted his head, hair shifting, the hint of eyes staring out; Will went rigid and held his breath, swallowing, “they took everything.”

“Who did? Who took everything from you?”

“I don’t *know*,” the spirit let out as a pained, keening sound.

“Were there two of them? More?” Will asked quickly.

When the hands reached out and grabbed, it wasn’t the same as the hot, aggressive hands of Crawford. The touch was pressure born of will alone, *cold and terrifying in the way only death*

could be. The hair over the man's eyes was barely covering them now, revealing eyes without lids, the bulging orbs of white bloodshot, no iris or pupil, just a milky cloud, sickening and glossy. Keeping his nerve was all he could do, even in the face of his own mortality.

"Who killed you Michael?" Will asked steadily.

"...Three," he said, his fingers flexing, "there were three."

"Humans?"

"No. A man, a woman and a girl."

"How did they capture you?"

"Silver."

Will nodded, his theory affirmed.

"I wasn't dead," he said, choking out through the sound of tears, "I wasn't dead when they started taking...everything."

"I'm going to make this right," Will said, "I'm going to make this right for you. I promise."

"Tell Milly, please. Tell Milly Grey Pelt I'm sorry."

In the space of a blink the pressure disappeared, the warmth returned to his arms and the lights in the kitchen buzzed back to life, throwing a stark shard of light out into the dark living room. Will found himself alone on his floor, sighing out long and slow in relief. When the howl came, drifting on the night air, Will thought it was one of the mutts upstairs. Through the barrier of two thirds of a bottle of bourbon, it took the sounds of a car screeching up his driveway to realise that it wasn't. *The wards were jangling in his mind, the yapping, childlike cry of a fox wailing on the air.*

His feet were unsteady but his mind raced, pulling him towards the sink to yank open the door and grab the pistol there before hurrying to the front door and opening it rashly.

Headlights and howling. He saw the dog first, shaggy golden fur racing across the dirt, paws flying. The truck second, careening into view as a man, tall, balding, threw himself from the driver's seat and ran towards him with a grimace. Holding up the pistol in both hands, Will tried to comprehend what the hell was happening.

"Get back here!" the man was screaming.

The dog had made it to the stairs, trotting up and letting out a yipping whine before circling around to hide behind Will's legs. Turning to look down, Will could see the dark eyes of the dog staring up.

Pain and scared and don't want to and sanctuary and help me help me help me. Will hoped, when he woke up with an inevitable hangover the next day, that he wouldn't regret this split second decision.

"Abigail!" the man was close enough now to see clearer, mid forties, eyes crazed, teeth gnashing, rifle in his hands; he stopped on seeing Will, gun raised.

“You need to go,” Will said as soberly as he could manage.

“This is none of your business,” the man’s voice was soft and reedy, juxtaposed to his violent demeanour, “give me back my property! Abigail, get here now.”

“She’s asked for sanctuary,” Will said, keeping the gun trained as best he could, even as it wavered back and forth; when the man made to raise his rifle Will squeezed the trigger and fired, the round barrelling into the ground just to the left of the man’s foot.

“*Jesus Christ!*” he yelled, “What the fuck is the matter with you!?”

“Oops,” Will said, frowning as he gave the man a significant stare, “I missed.”

“You’re fucking crazy..!”

Another round, this one clamouring out with a crash. The man jerked around and let out a cry on seeing his passenger window shattered. He started back and nearly fell, regaining his balance as he backed away, even as his face showed that he wanted nothing more than to rush forwards and deal with Will.

“Who knows,” Will said with a deranged grin, “maybe if I stop trying I’ll get the hang of it.”

“You can’t keep her from me,” he was saying as he backed up, fingers tight around his gun, “you can’t run from me girl!”

Will didn’t move until the man was in his truck and backing down the driveway, turning and putting his foot down enough to leave runnels in the dirt. Watching the headlights bump and flit through the trees, the noise of the engine retreating. Lowering his gun Will clicked the safety on and leaned forwards, hands on his knees as the adrenaline began to ebb. The blood pumping through his veins was keeping him from wobbling as he turned, looking down in confusion to find the dog gone. Will looked up, lost, scanning his way into the house. There were yips and barks coming from the stairs as he ran, rounding through the kitchen to find the dog, standing, ears back, tail between its legs as it faced the pack currently bottling up the stairs, all bared teeth and hackles on end.

“It’s ok, it’s *ok*,” he said, putting the pistol down carefully on the windowsill and crouching down to get to eye level the worried animal who was now licking its muzzle and moving around on its front paws.

Nowhere to run and can’t do this and please don’t make me!

“I promise, no one’s going to make you do anything you don’t want to,” he said, using his right hand to steady himself as he lost his balance, “it’s ok, I promise. That goes for you lot too,” he called up the stairs; the clamour on the stairs slowed to growls; Will stared into the dog’s eyes and spoke softly, “I know what you are,” the dog whined, letting out a bark, “sorry sweetheart, haven’t met a dog yet that I could read the thoughts of.”

If he had known that she would shift, right there on his rug, he maybe wouldn’t have gotten so low to the ground. One minute there was a timid dog standing before him, and next a pale, completely naked teenager, her big dark eyes full of tears and her skin marked with mud and scratches. Will leapt up, staggering and tripping over himself to turn around.

“Please, don’t be scared!” she shouted, her voice wavering.

“Not scared,” Will stood with his back to her and shook his hands, muttering under his breath, ‘*why does all the crazy shit always happen to me?*, “just need you to put some clothes on.”

“But I...”

“Upstairs, on the right. Clothes. Wardrobe. Now.”

“I...ok. Sorry.”

The sound of her bare feet padding up the stairs left Will standing facing the wall and wishing he didn’t have an eidetic memory. Banging his head against the wall didn’t seem to help.

“*Ow*,” was all he could manage, rubbing at his forehead.

It was a short journey to the sink with the bottle, watching the bourbon flow down the plug hole and wishing, even though he knew it was utterly impossible, that his life could maybe just be that little bit simpler for a while.

Just a little bit.

Chapter End Notes

Spiorad na foraoise, oscail mo shúile. Lig an veil a tharraingt ar leataobh.
Spirit of the the forest, open my eyes. Let the veil be drawn aside.

biotáillí dorcha, lig don phasáiste seo dul tríd
dark spirits, allow this one passage through

tá cead agat
you have permission

Harvest Moon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How long has it been since you ate last, exactly?"

Opening the fridge Will let out a sigh. All that was left was a half finished packet of cheese and a pint of milk. Closing the door, he looked at the table, at the reason why. Abigail, remembering the name from her father screaming it at the top of his lungs the night before, sat at his dining table in a pair of his jeans and an old flannel shirt he used for painting in, consuming what little edibles he had in his house. Toast and jelly, porridge, the last of the cereal, two helpings of spanish omelette. And as she scraped up the last out of the bowl, she looked at him like he might be next.

"Turning makes me hungry," she mumbled, gulping down a whole glass of orange juice while he watched, frowning.

"I can see that."

The result of the split second decision, he derided himself. Walking into the living room Will grabbed his keys to shove into his pocket, unhooked the phone from the wall, putting it to his ear and holding it with his shoulder. Dialling was easy, even if thinking about what he was going to say wasn't.

"*Good morning, Baltimore Social Services Department, Laura speaking, how can I help?"*

"Um, hello, can I speak to..."

He didn't hear the footsteps until they were right on him and the receiver was yanked from his ear, leaving it dangling against the wall from the cord. All he could do was watch as Abigail, wild eyed, started jamming on the switch hook until the handset rang out with a dial tone.

"You can't call me in," she was saying, voice strained.

"Abigail," he said, backing off when she growled, "can I call you Abigail?" he waited for her to nod, "I need to find you somewhere safe to stay. I'm not the sort of person that can look after you."

"I asked you for sanctuary," she said, her eyes just as large and scared as he remembered, "you *have* to help me. It's you people's code or something, isn't it?"

"*You* people?" Will muttered, raising a brow.

"A-and if you call them they'll not listen, they never listen, and they'll make me go back to him..." she was crying now and Will raised his hands, shoulders sagging.

"Alright, *ok*," he said, closing his eyes, "just stop, please. I have a really, really bad headache. I won't call, just stop."

After spending the night making up the spare bed for the distraught teenager that had decided to hole up in his house, then spend the morning scrubbing chalk from his floorboards and making her breakfast, Will just wished he had some aspirin.

“I need to go to work,” he said, leaning against the wall and rubbing at his face; she was biting her nails when he looked over; reaching up he batted her hands away, “that’s a bad habit.”

“What’s it to you?” she scowled.

“Look, if I could find a friend to...”

“I’m only safe if I stay here!”

“...to look after you till I get home,” Will said, watching as she her face fell, abashed, “you won’t be safe here on your own. What if your dad comes back, huh? I have an obligation to keep you from harm. Just let me do that.”

If I live to be two hundred I hope I never hear the word sanctuary again, Will thought miserably. It had never been asked of him before, and Will wasn’t one to believe just for the sake of believing, but any witch asked for sanctuary by someone in dire need of it was honour bound. He wished he had time to contact his coven, ask for advice, but looking at his watch showed he was already late.

“We have to go,” he said, “I’ll call her on the way. Come on,” Abigail looked at him as if she wished she had the courage to speak up, “you trusted me enough to run all the way here in the middle of the night,” he managed a small smile which seemed to settle her if nothing else, “trust me now.”

Expecting the ride to be quiet, Will didn’t ask her any questions. Instead, slowly but surely Abigail began to talk. She didn’t look at him as he drove, just kept her eyes out the window as she leaned against the door and talked about her father, about how he beat her and her mother, about how he expected her to follow in the family expectations but didn’t elaborate on what those were when asked.

“How exactly did you find me?” Will asked as they pulled off the highway.

“Woman in town, at the market. I was getting fruit and she said,” he could see the reflection of her smile in the window, “she said she could see the magic in me. Dad never could but I think it’s why he hates me.”

“You practice?” Will asked cautiously.

“No,” she said, looking to him sharply, “I mean I’ve never tried but she, well, I think I can. She said I could. She told me there was a witch in the Wolf Trap woods who takes in strays so I waited till everyone was asleep and I ran.”

“Well,” Will said tightly, thinking back to the livid father with a rifle in his yard, “seems like you didn’t wait long enough.”

The drive back up the elm lined road was like a trial by shame. Parking made him feel slightly strange, as if he were just popping by to say hello, as if it were three years prior and everything had been wiped away. And, maybe, if he wanted it badly enough, that it could be true.

When the door opened Alana Bloom greeted him like a stranger.

“Can I help you?” she asked, just like a customer service operative programmed to fool you into thinking they gave a crap what your problem was.

“I know I have no right to ask you to help out,” Will said, "but I don’t have anyone else who would."

“You’ve got a hard neck,” she said, eyes cold, arms folded.

“I’ll come back for her when I get away from work, I promise,” Will said, “I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

Alana looked past him to the girl leaning against his car, looking around her with paranoid jerks of her head. She didn’t look impressed but, after a moment, she looked down and shook her head, screwing up her lips.

“You owe me big time.”

“I know,” Will said, “thank you. I mean it.”

“You’d better.”

The office was busy when he stepped off the elevator, mainly phones he noted. As soon as one was hung up another was being answered. It made him nervous of more developments, nervous that he’d miscalculated and there had been another already. He kept to the perimeter, skirting the issue until he reached Crawford’s door, slipping inside.

“Maybe you should ask *him*.”

Will stopped short, finding himself the focus of four pairs of irritated eyes. Zeller’s and Jack’s he was used to by now, but Beverly’s he was just getting used to not seeing, and the last pair he didn’t even recognise.

“Will, come in and close the door,” Jack, sitting perched on his desk, motioned him in.

“Not sure I want to,” Will muttered, but closed the door nonetheless; the room was humming with tension.

It was easier to stay right where he was, leaning against the wall next to the door, in case of a need for a swift exit. The woman he didn’t recognise stood up, a painted on smile above her pencil suit and hard eyes below her short, all business haircut.

“So you’re the infamous witch,” she said, offering her hand in greeting.

Will stared at it before looking to Jack, brow raised, as he showed his gloveless hands, “You don’t bother to tell anyone, do you?”

“Physical contact is a problem for Will at the moment,” Jack explained.

“I see,” she said with a hint of dubiousness, retracting her hand, “well, I’m sorry that this meeting has to be on such bad terms. My name is Kade Prunell, Inspector General’s Office. I presume he is up to date on the situation?”

That Jack sighed and shook his head made Will nervous. It was almost impossible to stop himself from scanning the room, trying his best to sort through the throng of faceless voices, flashing

images threatening to overwhelm him. Not another, he thought through the fog of his hangover, please tell me there isn't another empty corpse in the basement. In the end, what he found was almost just as bad. Blinking rapidly and rubbing at his forehead, he beat Prunell to the punch as she opened her mouth to speak.

"Tattlecrime's been on the hunt again, huh?" he said sourly, looking to Jack.

"So you already knew," Prunell said, eyes narrowed.

"I got a glimpse of it, yeah," Will shrugged, letting out a chuff of laughter and looking off to his left as Jack gave him a 'please don't do this to me right now' stare, "you think *I* tipped them off?"

"Did you?" Zeller, sitting taught and nervous in his chair, bit out.

"I don't know, have I leaked anything to the press about this string of ritualistic murders?" Will feigned recollection, "What the hell do you think?" he spat out, staring at Jack, "Was it Garrison again?"

"Howell Garrison no longer owns Tattlecrime," Prunell said officiously, "but you have had dealings with them in the past."

"If you count dealings with as being charged with assault, then yeah I guess I had dealings."

"You attacked a journalist?" Beverly didn't look disgusted, but she didn't look happy about it either.

"He provoked me," Will shrugged, turning back to Prunell who was less than impressed, "whatever they're saying, I'm sure it's something they got from a local cop at the crime scene. Howell was always an expert at wheedling tit bits from idiots."

"Ms. Freddie Lounds," Prunell said angrily, "is not interested in publishing tit bits," she said, turning back to Jack, "I want this dealt with, Crawford. This sham of an investigation you are running was embarrassing when it was an internal scandal. Now the world knows and, in case you need reminding, it won't be my head on the chopping block. Find your leak and nip it in the bud, before we have to escalate the issue."

Will stood his ground as she pulled the door open and flurried past him, closing it with a decisive snap. *A visceral, unequivocal flash of Jack Crawford on his knees and, behind him still in her pencil skirt suit, Prunell holding an axe which she swung down with a furious, bloodthirsty battle cry.*

"Oh," Will smirked, jerking his thumb towards the door, "I like her."

The room was quiet on the surface, but beneath it bubbled up, everyone speaking but not voicing.

"Don't get too giddy Graham," Jack said, motioning him over, "I'm guessing you haven't seen it yet."

The website was even more garish than he remembered. The rust red background and the clickbait arrows covering the screen. It should have been a shock to see his picture, his face blown up in an insert bubble, but all it brought back was distasteful memories. Garrison had been a low rent hack with the talent of a box of rocks, but he could be vicious when he wanted to be. After Miriam,

things had been difficult, and Tattlecrime had been the most damaging in that regard. He read the article slowly, ingesting every word this enigmatic Ms. Lounds had put-to-paper.

The FBI isn't just hunting psychopaths, they're head-hunting them, too, offering competitive pay and benefits in the hopes of using one demented mind to catch another. Sure, we're familiar with the stereotype of the FBI profiler, swaggering onto a crime scene, fitting the pieces together like a master puzzler with his 1000-piece jigsaw. In reality, these profilers should be likened to harridans reading a cup of spent tea leaves – passing off their active imagination as incisive fact. In this case, the crone reading your fortune is an apt comparison, as Will Graham is a certified wiccan and practitioner. Not the persona any sane individual would trust with you and your family's safety.

"You don't really think I did this, do you?" Will asked wryly.

"No," Jack said stoutly, "but I'd be interested in who the fuck did."

"It takes one to know one?" Will read the headline out loud, "Not very imaginative is she?"

"She didn't need to be," Jack said as he clicked again, taking them to the full story.

"Jesus," Will frowned, leaning in, "where the fuck did she get all of these photographs?" scanning down, catching words in bundles, *lunatic: organs removed: Institute for the Criminally Insane: orphan: cursed: caffeine: hunted*. Will blinked, backing up, searching for that word again.

*...it's not difficult to see the curse following Graham like a shadow...*he followed the line down, focusing hard enough to block out the sound of the others talking to one another…*apparently caffeine doesn't agree with him. Could this be because…*Will felt his hackles rising, reading further…*an orphan whose parents left him to a witch cult…*he thought he could hear his blood rushing in his ears… *a man who sees a parapsychiatrist like Hannibal Lecter shouldn't be hunting, he should be hunted…*

"Son of a bitch," he whispered out, feeling an intense sense of justification, even as it presented as a stab in the back, "I need to make a call."

"Will, wait…" Jack tried to stop him but Will was gone before he had the chance.

The bathrooms were empty on their floor. Will fumbled the yellow flip sign out of its cubby hole and stuck it outside, *Please do not enter, cleaning in progress.* Grabbing his phone he tried to bite down on the anger, rash and unstable as it was. The feelings were rushing fast and hot, waiting for the sound of that smooth voice, waiting to feel the vindication. When the phone eventually clicked to voicemail, Will let him have it.

"Thank you so much," she was saying, tears in her eyes.

"Not at all Marianne, it is my place to see you well."

"You're a saint," she leaned in to press her hands against his chest.

"We must remember boundaries," he said, stopping her in her tracks, "it is important not to confuse healing for affection. Make that a problem of the past."

“Oh, yes,” she laughed unconvincingly, “of course, I...I’ll see you next week.”

Once she was gone, Hannibal Lecter took a moment to centre himself, sighing as his lips turned downwards. The people he worked with had always been servile, feeble and distressingly uninteresting in their psychoses. Now, having probed only marginally into the fascinating mind of Will Graham, he wasn’t sure how much longer he’d be able to keep up the ruse with the normal pigs. His other patients were wearing on his last nerve.

Taking a seat at his desk he opened his patient journal and tried to think of something to write. He put the pen to paper and blanked, looking up across his desk, trying for something, anything. On noticing the red light flashing on his phone he sat back, sighing, before scribbling *non sequitur* against Marianne’s name and leaning over to press for his answer service.

“*Message from zero seven six zero zero eight two seven four five eight received today at twelve twenty three,”* he listened vaguely, face leaning into his hand, waiting for the usual request for cancellation or tearful call asking for a phone consult. When the voice started, he felt his eyes flick to the phone sharply, “*I know you’re there. I’m kind of glad, really, that we don’t have to talk to one another. You’d just try and use some fancy, piece of crap psychological technique to talk me down, try and explain away your horse shit. Your pretence of giving a fuck really needs work, by the way. I thought that you’d have enough notoriety in your field already, but whoring yourself out to Tattlecrime really is scraping the bottom of the stinking barrel, isn’t it? Should have gone with my gut and ended all of this when I shut that fucking door in your smug face. Don’t call me. And if you feel the need to make another social visit, remember I keep my shotgun loaded.”*

Hannibal sat still, waiting for the message to begin giving him options to save or delete before he shut it off. Sitting back into his chair he licked at his lips and absorbed. It was important, he was sure, and so pressed to turn the machine back on and repeat it. The second time around was more entertaining, at least, even if still unnerving. Lifting his laptop out from beneath his new lamp, Hannibal logged in and searched, quickly and easily finding what he was looking for considering it was splashed across all of the news headlines that were offered up. He stuck with Tattlecrime, entering into the lair of hack journalism with a sharp, closed lipped smile, reading intently.

“It seems you have been most rude, Ms. Lounds,” he said to himself as he clicked into her profile, observing her arrogance through the tilt of her chin, the fierceness in her eyes, “what is to be done about that?”

“We’re running out of time.”

Getting Jack Crawford alone had been tricky, but doable. Will could tell he wanted to ask more questions about the leak, about where Will had gone and who he had called. In truth, he would have been happy to drop Lecter in the shit, but right then, as Jack stood in the break room with him, he let the chance pass him by.

“Don’t you think I know that?” Jack said, walking slowly to one of the cheap chairs before sitting in it heavily.

“I think you know that we’re also running out of options,” Will said; Jack watched him with wary interest, “yeah, yeah, I know, it’s not that, well...it is that but it’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I really hope you’re going to get to a point.”

“I have a name.”

“A name.”

“A name of a girlfriend, for our last vic, that I want to follow up.”

“Ok,” Jack said, watching as Will swithered.

“She’s a Were, so I need you to check in the register. Might be difficult to track her down.”

“I’ll get a tag on her and send it down to Registration, let you know what we find,” one more ponderous silence and Jack snapped, “Christ, spit it out Graham, I really don’t have time for this.”

“The perps that killed him,” Will said quickly, “there were three, and they weren’t human.”

Taking a breath, Jack scratched at his cheek and looked to the door as if worried someone would enter at any second, “Do I want to know how you found this out?”

“No,” Will said truthfully.

“Shit,” Crawford muttered.

“Please Jack, let me chase this lead. I won’t tie it to the case until I’m sure,” he walked to the table Crawford was sitting at and stood close enough to murmur, thigh resting against the melomane, “you can’t be implicated if you’re ignorant.”

“Well doesn’t that just make me feel better,” Jack said, “do you think that all our vics, that they might have been half breeds?”

“What, because one of them was a Were, now you think all of them might be?”

“You’re the one that said they were being eaten,” Jack said, “these killings are for a reason. If they’re being harvested. If this thing, creature, has a taste for humans then why wouldn’t it stick with humans? Why suddenly ask its cronies to send out for a wolf?”

“I see your point,” Will nodded, concentrating before he looked back to Jack, “I want to take another look at the victim's bodies.”

“Absolutely not,” Jack said, standing to his full height; Will backed away instinctively, “but I can give you access to their homes, all except the first. The family has already set into motion for sale, we have no right to re-enter.”

It was as close as a truce Will thought he might ever get with Crawford, and better than nothing in the long run. Nodding, Will thanked him and made to leave before he said something he’d regret. The last thing he needed was another fight. Just as he opened the door Will looked back.

“I want Katz with me.”

“I need her here, she’s still analysing the vics clothes and the fluids at the scene,” Jack said, “you can take Zeller, he’s finished the blood anatomy.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Will said coldly.

“No, I think it is,” Jack looked straight at him, forcing Will’s eyes to scatter away, “two eyes are better than one, and I don’t want you doing anything illegal.”

“Gee,” Will said acerbically as he stepped out the door, wishing he’d just kept his big mouth shut, “thanks.”

It was a long drive out to West Friendship, even longer with hatred riding in the passenger seat. Part of him had wished Zeller would get in the back and leave him alone, but instead he slipped in next to him and put the stereo on full. They spent the next hour ignoring each other, and Will had been glad at least for the blaring music; something to focus on and keep anything unwanted from slipping through. His mood was foul enough as it was without hearing anything degrading, a rotten cherry on top of the crap sundae.

The town itself was pleasant. Green and leafy. The sun was shining. Even when they pulled into the street of the house, which was singled out by its black and yellow crime scene tape, things still seemed so very normal. The house was utterly average. Bungalow, white paint walls with a red door, a garden that had once been pristine now overgrown with weeds and molehills. The second victim Jessica Salome had been a waitress at a local diner, she kept odd hours and didn’t have many friends. Will applied Crawford’s acetate of a halfbreed over the framework of Jessica’s life and began to find a few parallel lines.

“So Jack asked us to come all the way back out here,” Brian was saying as he opened up the back of the SUV, unclipping his kit, “to check it over just one more time?”

“I never got a chance to see where they lived,” Will said, taking off his jacket and throwing it back into the driver’s seat, “houses tell lots of stories, more than bodies sometimes.”

“If walls could talk.”

“Right,” Will said, reaching in to take a pair of gloves from Zeller’s kit before walking up the short path to that red front door, calling over his shoulder, “bring the case notes.”

“What am I, you’re caddy?” Zeller bit back, but Will was already cutting his way inside, unlocking the door with the key Jack had given him.

Dusty strawberries and rotting meat, that was what assaulted him as the door opened like an ancient tomb, exhaling its last breath. Stepping inside seemed sacred somehow, as if they were bringing life back into the building itself, reanimating its withered body. A short corridor, kitchen off to the left all chipboard cabinets and linoleum flooring, tins of cat food still sitting out on the countertop, living room to the right with its brown material sofa, sagging in front of the television on a glass stand and a coffee table still with rings from cups imprinted on the surface. After looking around both rooms briefly, Will headed back to the corridor.

“They found her in the bedroom?” he asked as he heard Zeller walk inside.

“Yeah, she was on the floor at the foot of the bed,” he said casually, curling the top sheet of the report over the top of the clipboard, “head towards the window.”

He could feel the temperature drop as he headed to the end of the corridor, ignoring the photographs and paraphernalia hanging against the dated wallpaper. When he reached the bedroom

it was cold enough that he wished he'd kept his jacket on, rubbing at his bare forearms.

"What time did the coroner predict?" he asked as he walked into the bedroom, the white bedspread edged with lace and sprayed with dried blood, as it was up the walls, on the low ceiling and across the window glass. There were a couple of shadows in the spray, which made sense of Jack's conviction that there had been two perps at the scene.

"Stan said anywhere between eleven and two in the morning."

"It's cold back here," Will muttered, stepping in carefully.

"Didn't notice," Zeller shrugged.

The carpet was wiry and hard wearing, an unpleasant beige colour. It made it easy to see where she had been, the lasting ghost of Jessica outlined in the pooling blood stain on her cheap carpet. Hunkering down at the top, or so he guessed it, where he assumed the head would have been. Reaching out with his right hand he thought he might be able to imagine her there, *stroke her blond hair and tell her things were going to be ok*. She hadn't been classically beautiful, the sort most people would look right past, but Will had been enamoured of her eyes. They were those of someone who'd known suffering, tinted with past sadness. It gave her an air of beauty he couldn't explain.

"Ok, mind telling me what you're doing?" Zeller asked, looking unimpressed.

"I need to know whether or not she was a were, or a halfbreed of some sort," Will said, pulling out a small zip up bag from his back pocket.

"Don't even think about it," Zeller said, frowning when Will didn't listen, emptying the contents into his left hand; *sage, rabbit hair, ground ashes and blood, formed together into a cake and dried,* "I told Jack I wouldn't let you..."

"Wouldn't let me what?" Will asked, looking up at the man intensely, grabbing his matches and striking one quickly, the smell of sulphur dioxide rich in his nostrils as he set the flickering flame to the cake in his palm, "Considering you didn't see anything, what could you possibly report back? Isn't that right?"

"This is fucking crazy," Zeller shook his head and backed away.

"Welcome to my world."

It began to burn slowly, creating a small cone of fire that ended in a towering ribbon of smoke. He walked past Zeller, forcing the man to back up, muttering. Out into the corridor with the smoke following him like a banner.

"An carachtar sna ballaí, na cosa a shiúil na cláir urláir, na lámha a rinne an leaba," he thought he could hear a sound rising, "Lig dom í a fheiceáil."

It was as he reached the edge of the kitchen door that it happened. A screech, like an owl would be to the mouse before the talons closed. Suddenly, the fire in his hand went out like it had never been lit in the first place. Will looked down, frowning worriedly, touching the cake and feeling the warmth there.

“There’s something wrong,” Will said, shaken, “it isn’t working, there’s something...”

He thought he could hear a noise, out of place, not a wail, not a screech, more like a tapping, he thought as he turned to look into the living room, a clopping a...

“Graham you’re freaking me the fuck out right now,” Zeller was saying, “what the hell, would you..?”

And then it was there. Will couldn’t help but throw himself backwards with a cry seething out through his clenched teeth, barrelling into the cheap dining room set, knocking over chairs as he fell to the ground . *Right there, standing by the horrible glass coffee table, ebony skin and stretched taught like a mummified corpse over bone.* He tried to back away, struggling across the shiny floor, legs kicking, panicked . *Tall, taller than he could imagine, tall enough that its antlers scraped the ceiling and its long claws hung by its sides, trailing the tops of the chairs.* He could see Zeller rushing into the kitchen as if in slow motion. *It’s milky white eyes trained upon him as its hoofed feet moved forwards, raising one nightmare hand up and out and close enough to touch...*

He clenched his eyes shut and felt his body shaking, his jaw so tight that it hurt, his teeth grinding as he tried and failed to force words out of his mouth.

“Graham, what the fuck!”

Opening his eyes was difficult because he did and didn’t want to in equal measure. Finally he managed to peel them apart, finding the vision...gone; nothing but Zeller, furious and terrified.

“Is this a joke, huh? At my expense?” Zeller was asking, jiggling on his feet, “Or you just lost it? Come on, should I be getting out of here or what?”

“Did you see it?” Will choked out quietly, already knowing the answer.

“See *what?*” he was asked, Zeller looking behind himself and rubbing his gloved hands together, “Christ, can we go now? I don’t think this is a good place to be.”

It felt as if every hair on his body were standing on end, but somehow Will managed to struggle to his feet. He felt as if he were leaving part of himself on the floor, still a quivering, traumatised mess, while the other part of him walked slowly forwards, intrigued enough to overwrite the fear. Mostly. There was something here, he knew there was. Zeller was still talking but Will couldn’t listen, couldn’t concentrate. Instead he managed to reach the spot he’d seen the creature standing.

“Taispeáin dom do rúin,” he whispered out reverently, reaching forwards to touch the chairs, the table, the wall…

His eyes widened in amazement. The next thing he knew he’d pulled out the short folding blade he kept in his front pocket for collecting plants and cutting supplies, flicking it open and pulling back his arm before slashing with as much force as he could through the old paper, yellowed with nicotine.

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” Zeller shouted, mortified.

“Help me,” was all Will could say, digging into the wallpaper with his penknife, ripping it away with his fingernails, “*help me* for fuck’s sake!”

For a moment Will thought Brian might turn tail and run, call Jack, call the police, who knew. To the man's credit, what little there was of it to give, he hurried to Will's side with a muffled curse and began stripping what he could. Once they started the wallpaper began to come away easy, far too easily if he thought about it, in long screeching strips as if the glue had been melted in just that spot alone. When they were finished they both stood back, away from the curling mess of paper on the floor, the dust in the air and the huge complex circular symbol they had mostly uncovered. It presented as a burn, but Will thought it looked gouged more than anything. Gouged with something hot, indelibly marked into the wood and plaster. Will didn't recognise any of the symbols but they spoke to him, making his eyes itch. There was a peculiar smell on the air, Will thought, like sucking in acrid smoke through your teeth so that the taste ached on your tongue. The phantosmia left a burning in his throat that made him cough. When he reached out to touch, fingers feeling for the energy, Zeller grabbed his wrist without thinking.

"Don't touch it!"

A white hot wire shoved directly into his mind, like an electroshock to the temples. Thick clouds of contentment, flashes of a small boy running across green grass with a football in his arms, hatred and anger, an older man slamming a door shut behind him as a woman sat on the couch crying, fear and confusion, the redhead beauty, smiling at him like he was her world while he poured out their secrets for her, loving that she respected him, loving that she would choose him.

When Will managed to pull back inside his own skull he found himself on his knees, gasping, and Zeller curled away, clutching at his hand. A silence only broken by breath and muttered curses.

"Oh fuck, oh *fuck*," Zeller was saying.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Will ground out, looking up, eyes screaming with anger, "got a thing for redheads, do you?"

"Just stop talking, just stop alright?"

"Does Freddie fucking Lounds have red hair, Brian? Answer my fucking question!"

"Why do you ask me anything, you already have all the answers don't you," Brian muttered out, face falling.

"You," Will coughed into his hand and tried not to fall over, "you're the leak."

"Shut up, shut your fucking mouth!" Zeller was shouting, "It wasn't like that! I didn't...she lied to me I didn't know who she was. God dammit, why'd it have to be *you* of all people."

"I told you not to touch me," Will said faintly, eyes closing without his consent, forcing him to shake his head to keep them open, "no one ever listens."

"Jesus," Brian's face fell as he slumped against the wall, sliding down to sit on the floorboards; he looked at Will, eyeing him as if gauging whether he could take him in a fight.

"Listen you dumb piece of shit," Will said with all the energy he could manage, "I really don't have time for your indiscretion, and neither do you. I need to get to the other crime scenes. This might be the only clue that we've missed so far. I need to know what it means and if it's at the other sites. It shows premeditation, and maybe even that the perps had access to the house before the murder."

“You’re not going to tell Crawford about me?”

“What good would that do?” Will asked, brow raised, “I’m not petty enough to ruin our chances catching this thing just to watch *you* suffer.*”*

“I…thanks,” Zeller looked unconvinced but hopeful, “I think.”

“Don’t mention it.”

As they headed back to the car, his feet stumbling and his light head making him a little unsteady even as the sunlight helped clear the cobwebs, Will had a sudden, horrible sinking feeling in his gut.

The answer machine message, sending up a flare over his landscape of screw ups .

“Oh shit,” he thought, rubbing at his face as he leaned against the SUV.

Brian opened the driver’s door and looked at him expectantly.

“Get in Will, come on.”

“You rash, stupid bastard,” Will muttered to himself; he pulled out his phone and thought of calling to apologise, but it was just as impersonal as the message that had got him into this mess in the first place. Instead he got into the car and pulled the door shut.

“Can you keep her with you for just another hour?” Will asked as he pulled into the end of the unfamiliar street.

“*Why is it any time you make me a promise you break it?”* Alana said, her voice stuttering in and out a little as he jerked up the handbrake.

“At least I’m consistent,” he said as he looked out at the row of veritable dream houses, all neat in their palatial rows.

“*Consistently dreadful,*” she said, no humour.

“I mean it, I will be there within the hour, I just really have something I need to do before I come get her, ok? You’re saving my life,” he tried for a smile, hoping it would manifest in his tone.

“...Fine,” she said, though it sounded anything but fine.

“Thanks Ala-...” he heard the call cut off before he could finish, pulling the phone away from his ear so he could stare at the screen, puffing up his cheeks before letting out the air with a pop, “well that’s just great.”

His day could have been worse, he thought facetiously, at least he hadn’t burst spontaneously into flames or fallen off of a cliff. It had taken longer than he’d hoped to find the caustic symbol at the other murder sites, but they had managed to pull it off. *One on the floor beneath an oven, thick with dirt and grease, one behind a radiator in a bathroom, one under the carpet in a closet.* Each one hidden from view, and each one identical to the last other than varying in size. On their return they found Jack had already headed home, for which Will was both annoyed but, on another level, glad.

He kept Zeller back to help him write up the report, for which the man was sullen but compliant, and then messaged Jack to tell him they'd made some progress.

An easy escape, for one night at least. Though the mystery of it still plagued him, *something else occupied his thoughts just that little bit deeper.*

It had been snowing, leaving only vague patches across the urban landscape of the inner city. Getting out of the truck and locking it behind him, Will shrugged into his jacket and blew into his hands before putting on his gloves. It felt to him like he was burning bridges all around his little island. The worst and most ironic part, he thought to himself as he began walking towards Lecter's house, was that he hated being alone. He liked to think he should have more pride in himself, that he could admit that without a psychiatrist's session dragging it out of him kicking and screaming. But he couldn't. Hadn't, anyway, until Lecter had shoved the truth in his face and asked him what he thought Will was going to do about it. Another reason he had been so quick to leap down the man's throat at only the vaguest hint of betrayal.

Taking in the strays was all he had left, but it wasn't enough. Not any more.

The sound of a door opening pulled him from his reverie. Looking up past the wall at the bottom of Lecter's garden Will watched as the front door opened and a man emerged. Later, Will wouldn't be able to explain why he did it, but in that moment his instincts told him to hide. Ducking down behind the wall, Will listened as voices murmured to one another, unintelligible at this distance. Risking it, Will peered up over the wall, seeing the man's face for only a second before he turned his back. It was familiar, Will thought, but he wasn't sure why and couldn't think off hand who he was. He watched them talk briefly before the man trotted down the stairs, looking pleased with himself, and slid into a sleek black Mercedes. He breathed a sigh of relief as the Mercedes drove off in the opposite direction, purring softly as its tail lights disappeared behind the tall trees lining the street. The last thing he'd want was to be caught skulking in the neighbourhood like a common thief. Standing up made him feel like a fool. Will grimaced, shaking his head and putting his hands in his pockets.

"Good start to an apology," he berated himself as he pushed through the gate and walked towards the front door, "so sorry about chewing you out for something you didn't do, by the way I'm spying on your house guests. Hope that's ok."

The snow had stuck to Lecter's three story house like a picture postcard, dusted icing sugar snow on the roof, icicles hanging from the Grecian portico and upper storey window. The bushes lining the path were tall, gangly winter jasmines, effusive with perfume from strings of delicate white flowers. There was smoke coming from the chimney, leaving a large part of the left side of the roof devoid of snow. Standing at the grand double front doors Will felt the need to turn around and leave things where they stood. Maybe it's for the best, he thought suddenly, maybe I shouldn't…

Remembering Crawford stamped out the tiny match-like flame of that particular thought process. Will hung his head and sighed, reaching up to ring the doorbell, a prisoner awaiting his sentence. God Graham, he rebuked himself as he heard footsteps approaching, you're so over-dramatic.

"Tell me you have forgotten som…" Lecter was part way through saying, looking over his shoulder, before he turned and stopped.

Sucking his bottom lip into his mouth and running his teeth over the sensitive flesh, Will took a breath and waved half heartedly from the hip.

“Not who you were expecting?” he asked.

That Lecter didn’t reply at all just made Will feel worse. So used to seeing the man in his double breasted suits, worn like classical armour, to see him dressed in a carmine shirt beneath a chocolate vest and trousers, no tie and top button loose seemed overly invasive. The air was deadened by the cold, the snow on the ground softening everything, the sounds of the city seeming far afield. Looking off to the left, at the tall, bright windows of the first floor, Will continued.

“Look I’m sure you’re sick and tired of hearing me apologise to you by now,” he started, swallowing, “I am no good at being social, never have been and by this stage I’d say it’s fair I probably never will. But that doesn’t excuse what I said to you. I assumed you had leaked my information and it was my mistake. So...I was thinking maybe you want to refer me on to someone else. That would be best, and...yeah,” looking back to Lecter the man had not moved, other than to brush the hair against his forehead back from his left eye, leaving the dark swathe still falling against his skin, “Then that would be that. Sorry to,” Will felt his lips twist wryly at the apology, “bother you this late.”

Walking back down the path Will felt like he could smell the flames, the wood, hear the bridge collapsing. It serves you right, you stupid moron, Will told himself. Every chance you get, you screw it up. Lecter’s words from their last session bit at him: *you attract what you cannot have, and then reject it out of hand because the very thought of it terrifies you.*

“And yet you did not drive over an hour in the snow just to tell me you wish to see other people,” Hannibal suddenly spoke up.

That the words stopped him dead in his tracks only made Will hate himself all the more. Can’t even have the courage of your convictions, can you? he thought as he half turned, shaking his head.

“It was an apology,” Will said sarcastically, “not a proposal.”

“Meeting the world with humour only works if you are not wearing a mask.”

“I don’t want a fight,” Will said, agitated.

“Then perhaps we could socialise like adults,” Lecter said as he stepped out into the growing dark; as he approached Will felt a need to back away mix with an equal need to walk forwards to meet him. It was sudden and over in a flash but he felt shaken by it. Lecter seemed to exercise a feeling of confused magnetism in him that Will couldn’t fathom, “god forbid we become friendly.”

“I don’t have a good track record with friends,” Will said, blinking as he took a deep breath and tried to steady himself.

“What a coincidence,” Lecter said, tilting his head and looking out across his garden as it faded into the evening gloom, “I have been told I have issues with trust.”

“And you chose me to test your teeth on?”

His words garnered a short but playful laugh through closed lips. It sent a jolting, pleasurable tingle across his spine, like someone running fingers over his bones.

“I’m the sort of man who spends his time building walls,” Will tried harder, feeling his lips chap with the cold.

“Then it is natural to want to see if anyone is adamant enough to climb over them.”

That dreadful curiosity which had been building ever since he’d thrown Lecter out of his house in a panic, mixed with the fledgling murmur of possibility, was no longer bubbling as it was boiling. *The possibility of someone strong enough to withstand the misery inherent in his life, confident enough to call him out on his bullshit, and generous enough to offer themselves despite the obvious detriment.* And all of it, every single last conception and idea and question and plan he could build regarding the man was blessed, marvellous guess work. A beautiful enigma the likes of which he’d never known.

Only one thing stood in the way, one more wall that needed scaling.

“I need to ask a favour of you Dr. Lecter, and you can ask one of me in return whenever you like,” Will said as he pulled at each of the fingers on his right hand glove until it was loose enough to remove; Lecter was watching him intently, seeming to enjoy the symmetry of Will’s request mirroring his own. He watched as Will pocketed his glove and then extended his hand, holding it out between them. For a moment Will thought he might have overstepped, misunderstood, but then suddenly, without compunction, Lecter reached out to accept his offer. Will braced himself, ready for the shock, the misery that would come with knowing too much, hurting and pushing away and losing all connection to another human being.

When the soft palm slid against his, long fingers curling around to grip, Will returned the handshake out of amazement more than anything else. It was disconcerting and bewildering, but at the same time utterly and completely wonderful. Will couldn’t remember a time when he’d been able to focus in on the feel of warm skin against his own, the pressure of another against his body, without drowning in thoughts and feelings that weren’t his own.

“You look surprised,” Lecter said as Will stared at their joined hands and smiled.

“Oh, uh,” Will shook his head, voice lilting on the hysterical side, “it's usually just a little more...interesting than this.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Lecter said, though he didn’t look it.

“What *are* you?” Will asked softly before he could stop himself.

“Perhaps I should be asking you the same question,” Lecter said as Will, seeming to come to himself, pulled his hand away and shoved it back into his glove, “but I think it will be mutually interesting finding the answer.”

“I need to, uh, sorry, I have to pick up, I mean Alana is waiting for me,” Will rattled out as he backed down the path, “thanks for...” Will blanked, still shocked, “...everything.”

“Good night, Will,” the man said calmly, all but silhouetted against his bright doorway.

“Night, Hannibal,” Will said, testing the name on his tongue and finding it savoury, with a hint of fizzy distress thrown in for good measure.

“Where were you?”

It should have been such a simple question, and yet had manifested as a labyrinth he wasn't sure he could see his way out of. In truth, wasn't even sure he wanted to.

"I had to check in with your friend Lecter," Will said as Abigail gave a cursory, shy thank you to Alana before hurrying to Will's truck and hopping in; they watched as she turned on the radio, the muffled sound of changing stations leaking out into the quiet country air.

"Everything ok?" she asked; Will could tell she hoped it came across uncaring, but there was a genuine worry she couldn't mask. It was the thing he loved most about her. Alana Bloom was unfalteringly kind, even when she was angry.

"Is anything ever?" Will replied gently; when she gave him a look he nodded to appease her, "It's fine. It'll be fine, I mean."

I hope, he thought. Rubbing his gloved hands together, Will couldn't help but feel the sweet electric pressure there, the memory of skin against skin. It was distracting. Hating to lose focus over something so base, Will tried his best to remain in the present.

"You know, only a little while ago you sounded like you wanted to ring my neck."

"Mm hmm," was her reply, looking up into his eyes purposefully.

A yellow of acceptance pulled through with a misery of blue creating a sordid green of self-loathing that brought the sadness back to her own doorstep. Will hated the thought, even as he tried not to feel glad that she wasn't going to tell him to leave and never come back. Again.

"Did she talk to you at all?" he asked.

"A little, but nothing substantial. Honestly? I gave her the remote and left her alone except for watering and feeding. She's a sad one, isn't she."

"Yeah," Will nodded, "yeah she is."

"You need to speak to a professional about her, get her help."

"Already trying," Will said, itching at his neck, "she's not making it easy, but I'll think of something."

"Have soapbox, will travel," she said, her hair tumbling over her shoulder as she leaned into the door frame; when she reached up towards his face Will jerked back, making her frown. That she tried again amazed him, that she'd tried at all sang to him like a siren song. He forced himself not to react, feeling her push through his hair, moving some wayward curl back into place.

Thinking about telling him she'd spent the day resenting the poor girl he'd lumbered her with because Abigail would be getting to go home with him while she would be left here alone, and that it had made her feel terrible. Even now she was thinking about curling up in front of the space heater with him and the dogs. Just contentment.

The caveat to his life, *always knowing*. It was draining, always understanding your own expectations but at the same time knowing that you could never live up to other peoples.

"Are you ever going to just slap me and get it over with?" Will asked contritely.

“Don’t hate you enough,” she said truthfully.

“I would. By now I really would.”

“I hope Hannibal can help you,” she said, making Will fidget, “because you’re worth it, under all the booby traps you have set up in your personality, waiting for someone to step too close. I hope he can help you see that, because I never could.”

“He’s an...interesting man,” Will said, unable to hide from the irony of his statement.

“Unflappable too,” Alana said wryly, “which should help when dealing with your neuroses.”

“I can be pretty flappy when I want to be,” Will said, making her smile, “Thanks again,” he said quickly, blinking, “I have to go. G’night.”

“Night, Will.”

He didn’t rush back to the truck, but he didn’t saunter either. It was always difficult to be judged, but even more difficult to be accepted. Will hoped that Alana was right.

“Did you have a nice time?” he asked as he got into the truck and started backing out.

“I like her dog,” Abigail said, shrugging.

“Yeah,” Will said as he waved goodbye to the woman in the doorway, feeling the heavy burden of *always knowing*, “me too.”

The landscape was a solid black canvass. Walking across its surface left an echo as his well shined shoes clacked, leaving a vagueness to the scope of the arena.

The first to arrive was a shadow, barely a shade lighter than the backdrop. As he approached it solidified, coalesced. *Standing with his back to him, khaki jacket over jeans, hands in pockets and grey eyes behind glasses and beneath unruly curls as it peered at him over its hunched shoulder. Ready violence and red stained hands, sucking in the brutality he encountered and absorbing it like a sponge.*

“What are you?” it asked through a mouth unseen, accusatory.

As he passed by the man kept his eyes on him at all times, heavy with suspicion and a want to lash out, to protect.

The next was not unexpected. It seemed to slink upwards through the darkness as if it were an oil, dragging itself out onto the surface. *All pale and soft lines, naked skin shining as if in moonlight, it got to its hands and knees and crawled, sleek, jaguar-like, his shoulder blades working beneath the muscle. As it reached him the hands started at his legs, grasping with fingers like claws, soft moans rumbling in its chest like a purring cat, then up to his pelvis as it pulled and gasped, the body climbing up and up, hands against his shirt, legs twined with his own, fingers trailing his throat as those bowed lips whispered seductively into his ear.*

“What *are* you?”

He moved on, searching. *The next was almost indistinguishable, a balled up mess of limbs sitting on the ground dressed in nothing but white t-shirt and boxers. A man curled in on himself, legs folded so knees and ankles were together, arms up over his head and face hidden from the world. His shoulders shook as he wept.* There was a need to reach out, to touch the nape of his neck. He brought a need for comfort but seemed to despise the very thought of it.

At the mere press of fingers the figure looked up, face stained with tears, now nothing but a child with familiar grey eyes.

"What...*am I*?" the boy managed to squeeze out through gritted teeth.

Continuing on was difficult. The darkness seemed to stretch on into infinity. Lost. *Alone*. It was deafening. It was absorbing. It was like falling. *It was like fading.*

By the time it appeared, he thought he might have given up at the penultimate moment, *that he might have been mistaken all along*.

It appeared as a trickle of grass in the darkness. Finding nowhere else to go his feet followed, shoes melting away to nothing as the grass grew and curled beneath his now bare feet. Keeping to the lush greenery allowed for plants to shoot up out of the abyss like a time lapse, animals popping into existence like bubbles, scattering and sniffing, trees looming in, branching out, creating a wondrous canopy as he descended inside. A profusion of sap and bird song enveloped his senses, leaving behind all thoughts of before.

And there, in the clearing, it waited. Under the sunlight its raven feather-fur was a stunning panoply from purple to green, glinting like obsidian while plush like velvet. Walking like a hunter, slow and soft, he kept himself in its blind spot. The raven stag snorted, shaking its glorious raiment, pawing at the ground with its hooves. As he approached the smell of blood reached his nose. *There, at the hoof, a grossly unjust clamping trap*.

On taking another step he knew he had been spotted. *A great, black eye was watching him*. Testing the waters, he moved forwards. *The stag let out a snort but merely shook its great antlers and waited*. Kneeling down against the lush grass, he reached out and took the trap in his hands. The edges were sharp, enough to cut in as he grabbed tighter and pulled. *The stag let out a low bray mixed with a piercing whine, lifting its head to the sky above*. The blood ran and his palms bled, teeth gritted, feeling the slice through flesh and bone.

Clack, ping. The great stag leapt free with a bleating whinny and rushed, limping, into the forest. Giving chase was his only option, even as the blood caked the ground, as his life slipped into the grass and the trees, fertilising the soil. The sunlight seemed to dim, to fade, the greenery shrivelling, the darkness reclaiming its territory. His legs felt leaden, the soles of his feet burning, reaching the edge of the thicket on his knees. Head hanging, breath coming hard, eyes on the void below. The expense had seemed to be for naught, and the sacrifice for little but to corroborate his suspicion.

When the hand appeared in his vision, direct but tentative, curious but afraid, it was all he had to lift his own and grasp it. It shook his matter of factly, as if unsure what the procedure truly was.

In his sleep, Hannibal Lecter smiled, shark-like, and rolled over on to his side.

Chapter End Notes

An carachtar sna ballaí, na cosa a shiúil na cláir urláir, na lámha a rinne an leaba. Lig dom í a fheiceáil.
The character in the walls, the feet that walked the floorboards, the hands that made the bed. Let me see her.

Taispeáin dom do rúin
Show me your secrets

Musical Bones

"*But many are saying, especially in light of recent events, that harsher penalties for the unregistered and stricter laws...*"

"*Grace, if I may interrupt you there. Harsher penalties? Stricter laws? Do these sound like immediate solutions to you? Believe me when I say we have a bone fide spree on our hands, and the best we, the American people, can be offered is piecemeal legislation. Which, I might add, will do nothing to stop the slaughtering that is running rampant in Maryland as we speak. And what's to stop it from spreading? How long till we have Unnaturals killing right and left with no one to hinder them?*"

"*I resent that term. And I suppose you would have us all locked up, that right? This whole debacle is one whisker away from the Salem witch trials..!*"

"And if those trials were to happen today we would have to tiptoe our way around all that dark magic in case someone got offended! All that can be done, right here, right now, is for the government and the Registry to step up and issue some sort of wartime decree."

"*Wartime? Are you even listening to yourself? You are the reason my children don't feel safe going to school!*"

"*You're children shouldn't be at school with my chil..!*"

"Yeah," Will said as he picked up the remote and shut them up, "and fuck you too buddy."

Taking a long sip of lukewarm ginger and lemon tea, Will sighed and felt the weight of it on his shoulders. The sudden silence was welcome, but tinged, tainted. Things were becoming fraught now that the truth was out. People who were never scared by supernatural goings on were now scared, and those who were always paranoid that the unnaturals were coming for their kids would be, as the delightful governor of Texas had alluded to moments ago, on the warpath. *A string of occult killings in the Baltimore area, now being identified as serial killings: a repeat of the terror practiced by the unknown subject who had held the moniker of the Chesapeake Ripper.*

"As if my job isn't hard enough," he muttered to himself.

Lack of sleep wasn't helping. *Itching. Crawling. Sudden tremors.* Not that he could really remember the reason he hadn't slept, just knew; from the aching in his joints and his eyelids betraying him, *closing, closing, jerking open*. Sinking down into the sofa cushions seemed like giving up, giving in. He tried to rationalise that it was necessary. Will let his eyes have their moment and, just for the sake of sanity and harmony, tried his best to relax.

The bleating of a stag, pained and terrified.

His eyes flew open and he sat up, taking a deep breath as the sound persisted in the room. It took a few seconds to realise it was coming from upstairs, *screaming.*

"Will? Will! I need hot water, the shower's running cold!" Abigail shrieked from upstairs.

“Then you used it all up,” he called, his heart beating a mile a minute; he clutched at his chest and cursed himself for being so jumpy.

“I've still got shampoo in my hair!”

It felt like a hook, slipping under the skin, barb catching, pulling. He set about boiling the only two kettles he owned on the stove. Will was sure this was a fantastic reason he’d never tried to have a relationship that would have ended in kids. The thought called a cynical smile to his lips.

“Sure Graham,” he said wryly, “*that’s* the reason.”

When the kettles began to whine, *scream*, he pulled them off the heat quickly. Even though she didn’t seem to be able to stop talking most of the time, Abigail was particularly closed lipped whenever Will tried to ask probing questions about her family. No further than her father’s abuse and her mother’s silence on the whole affair. Whenever he brought up talking to either of them face to face the girl would go ashen and quiet, enough that Will had been forced into a corner by his own moral centre. Walking up the stairs with a bucket of warm water, Will wondered why this split-second decision had worked its way under his skin and made a home. Enough that he barely questioned it when he entered the bathroom, Abigail wrapped in a large bath towel, rubbing her eyes, hair soaped with suds.

She just leaned her head over the bath.

He just rinsed the soap from her jet black locks, running his fingers through her hair.

They didn’t talk. Will fetched a small towel from the airing cupboard, dropping it over her head as she squeezed out the water. Couldn’t help but smile when he reached down to rub the towel vigorously.

“I’m not a child!” Abigail complained.

“Yeah, I know,” Will answered simply, standing up to leave, pulling the door closed behind him.

Was this the culmination of being human? he asked himself. Love and acceptance. Two things he wasn’t sure he would recognise. It was difficult to recognise something you had never truly seen, not *truly*. The closest he had come was a woman who haunted him, a shadow following his in his footsteps, a wraith trailing in his wake.

Easy, *so easy. An intrinsic, simple easiness between them. Another person who knew him so completely, enough to bear with him, to listen without judgement, to believe without compunction.*

“And this is why you own dogs,” Will said to himself as he set about cleaning up breakfast, mouth a hard line; an old lie pulled out of a dusty box he kept specially for himself.

By the time she reappeared, Will had finished what had to be done. Retrieved what he needed from the barn and laid it out on the table before beginning to spin the tight little spells into something useful. Had been a long time since he’d done anything so intricate under a time constraint, but he was sure he remembered the basics. If he was to tell himself the truth, he would have admitted it was exhilarating.

He would have told himself, *blood still soaked into the floorboards, the girl in his house, and the feeling of skin against his palm as they shook hands,* that he hadn’t felt this alive in years. The

thought made the itching worse.

The task was a need wrapped up in a formality, as most spells were. A ritual to equate with an idea, a purpose, a drive. *Twisting vines, strangling the heart of the raven. The rune carved into the flesh holding tight to the charm, so much that there was a desperation radiating from its core that Will did not appreciate. The thought made him feel the fingers at his throat, crawling and creeping; the threat of attachment.*

“Shouldn’t you maybe modernise and get central heating?” Abigail was grousing as she thumped down the stairs.

“Never really bothered me before,” Will said distractedly as he picked up the fruits of his labour, “come on. I have something I want to show you.”

Outside the air was crisp and clear. He could smell more snow coming on the horizon, see it in the fluffy edges to the clouds that rested just above the line of pine trees behind the house. There were motes suspended in the air, drifting like insects, creating a lazy, shifting pattern of volume; an understanding of the area, like a map. *His bubble, delicate and exposed.* As the wind blew it shuffled the tree branches, *horses tossing their manes, the whinny in the breeze.* It caught under the roof, across the drainpipe, creating a sound like a cello. Deep and resonant.

Standing in the garden, Will knew things were changing. Not just in the media, not just with the case or with his life. Abigail being here was changing things, moving the pieces. Without trying to think too much about it he pulled the charm out of his pocket and turned it around and around in his hands.

“How come the plants still grow in your garden even though it’s winter?” she asked; he turned to find her running her hand over a large snapdragon, tall, the buds showing colour before the flower bloomed, “is it a spell?”

“This ground is blessed,” Will said, putting his hand out palm down, fingers spread as he patted the air.

“Blessed by what?” she asked, eyes wide, *eager*.

“Just blessed,” Will said cagily; he knew that things were worse than he imagined when he was actually disappointed in himself that she looked unimpressed with his answer; he crooked his fingers and summoned her closer. Her eyes flicked up and down, quickly, *always so uncertain and so twitchy*. When she sidled up to him he tossed the charm to her, causing her to catch it on instinct.

Important to be taken wilfully, taken into her possession with the drive of a raven catching the mouse in its claws.

“What the hell is *this*?” she asked, frowning at the twist of dried vines holding their secret inside; she lifted it to her nose and smelled it. Will wondered if it was a leftover from her canine form, a need to sense everything through smell as her most heightened sense, “*augh*, it reeks!”

“It should,” Will said, making her glare at him pointedly, “it’s been dead for a while. Condenses the essence.”

“Of what? Why would I want some dead thing?”

“Raven heart. And because it’s a charm.”

“A charm?” she said sarcastically, “No offence, but I think I’d rather have something more...substantial.”

“It’s plenty, believe me.”

“Can’t I have a gun?” she asked quickly.

“*No*,” he said definitively, making her scowl, “now I need you to promise me you’ll keep that with you at all times,” she rolled her eyes and opened her mouth but he cut her off sharply, “*Promise* me.”

“Alright, gees,” she groused, looking down at the charm, frowning, “I will. I promise. Why does it even matter?”

“It’ll keep you safe.”

“How?”

“Stop asking so many questions,” he said sharply; she started, eyes wide, before skittering her gaze away across the plants, the grey clouds.

“Can’t you show me any spells? I thought you could help me.”

“It’s not that simple,” he muttered, eyes on the ground.

“But..!”

“*Abigail*.”

She shut down, hair falling over her eyes. *Your split-second decision.* She’s yours now, if anything happens to her who knows what will become of you? Even you don’t know, not really. And I’m not willing to find out the hard way, he told himself sternly. The rite of sanctuary was ancient and sacrosanct. A magic of binding. A magic of twine and blood.

“I can’t take you to Alana today. I told her I was going to do something official regarding your care and, as I clearly haven’t, you’ll need to stay here,” he muttered, “I have the wards set, and a couple of surprises for any unwanted visitors,” she looked at him, intent, dark eyes large enough to fool anyone into thinking she was nothing but an innocent child, “but if your father comes here looking for you don’t wait, alright? I want you to run with the pack. Do you understand me?”

“What if he..?”

“Run with the pack, they’ll keep you safe,” he interrupted her question, making her swallow her words back down her throat; he knew how he was being, a sullen piece of shit to keep *the attachment* at bay, “They can take you to a place in the woods, to a place no one can find without them” he gave her a significant look, “Do you *understand*?”

“Yeah, I get it. Ok.”

“Good.”

He knew it wasn't just because she was upset that he could hear her. He knew that it meant he was too. Upset. On edge. Itchy. Her eyes were looking at the charm in her hands, but her mind's eye was at the table with her mother and her father. They were eating breakfast, and they were smiling. The feeling of desperate love was overwhelming, enough that it made him sick with envy.

"Can't I come with you?" she muttered hopefully, already knowing what answer she would get.

"My work isn't exactly bring your daughter to work day friendly," Will said wryly.

It was only as he was getting into his car, giving her a wave, that he realised the Freudian slip. Not for the last time, Will would regret his split-second decision.

"You think this is a simple fucking thing? You think this is your annual family barbecue with clowns for the kids and champagne and hors d'oeuvres for the stuck up pricks, *for fucks sake* get you head in the game. You are an insignificant little worm crawling through the dirt of this planet and I am the fucking bird waiting on the grass above for you to wiggle, *just wiggle wrong once*. I will reach down through that dirt and take your flesh in my mouth and I will devour you alive. You will get this right," she annunciated each word with precision through ruby red lips, "or you will live with only regret."

Chilton felt like telling her that right now his only regret was having opened the door to his ample house when the bell had rung. Only not having answered would have caused even more havoc. Still. The panic was making him reckless. He knew it did. It worked on him like a virus, shaking down his cells, producing the fear like a hormone. Made his hands fidget. Made his palms sweat.

In comparison she looked ethereal, beautiful like a siren on a rock, calling him closer so she could lock her teeth around his neck.

"You know it's that sort of talk that got us all into this mess in the first place," he tried to say cockily.

"Don't attempt to be clever," she sat up from lounging in his large chair in his home office, red soled high heels clicking against the wood, "it doesn't suit you."

"I'm doing the best that I can," he said, noting her face turning sour, "there's only so much I can do before people start to notice. And I have put things in motion, alright? Pawns are in place."

"Since when do pawns have pawns?" she asked, bored as she played with a small ornament of a bull at the edge of his desk; when she pushed it off with her bright red fingernail it was a jolt to the system, an innate reaction, to catch it, "Oh dear, Frederick, don't tell me. Sentimental."

"From my life before," he said, twiddling the badly made bull in his fingers: he shouldn't have left it out, so careless. Turning it and turning it, seeing the words carved into its belly like a testament. *For daddy,* "I'll get results," he said, eyes hard, "Any day now we'll know if he's what we need."

"There are plenty more little pawns I can choose from you know," she smiled, "You were my first choice because you stink of servility. You're a natural born maggot.

"It's our delightful chats, that's what I love."

“Get,” she said, “it,” she stood up, “*done*.”

“Well why don’t *you* make your man fall in line?” Chilton bit out, like a small boy trying on his father’s shoes, “He’s the one in prime position to..!”

“He’s not my man, even you should understand that. No one makes him fall in line.”

For a hot, flashing instant he thought he might have seen her *give pause*. The actions of a person experiencing fear.

“He terrifies you, doesn’t he?” Chilton gloated, "Just like the rest of us."

“You think that’s funny?” she asked, smiling cruelly, “you’re the one that doesn’t understand what fear is. Because you have been to dinner doesn’t mean you aren’t on the list. Even now, he isn’t picky.”

Sniffing, Chilton pretended not to understand her intent, putting the little figurine back in place.

“None of us would have chosen this life, and its difficult for this to be impersonal,” she said as she walked past him; he could feel her there, just out of his peripheral. Not being able to see all of her set his nerves on edge, “but this isn’t only about you. We need team players, Frederick,” a hand clamped down on his shoulder, “team fucking players.”

Bedelia Du Maurier showed herself out, signalled only by the slamming of the front door. The snap left him bereft. Doing the best you can, he told himself acidly, isn’t fucking good enough is it.

“I got Price.”

Having spent his night mainly sleepless and his morning mainly neurotic, Will hadn’t the energy to feel optimistic. That he was actually being given good news was bewildering.

“...You *did*?” Will said, an involuntary smile flickering into place as he and Jack walked along the street together, “Well, that’s great! I thought he was off working on some big semiotics indexing project?”

“He was,” Jack said, his stride long enough that Will had to take an extra step to catch up, “then I sent him a picture of the seal you found at our victim’s homes. The only message I got was that he was on the next flight to Baltimore once he’s handed over to his colleagues. Should be here by evening.”

Their footsteps fell into line, like the clacking of a newton’s cradle; synchronous but parallel. He could feel the truth in it, their polarised existences. A bridge that couldn’t be built between them. Will wondered if he’d always known it, or whether everything that had happened with Miriam had shown him. It didn’t matter, that’s what he told himself. In the end it didn’t matter. Jack was a part of the journey, that was all. A part of his ritual.

“Are you going to try and get along with him this time?” he asked.

“Only if he isn’t still so relentlessly chipper,” Jack said sullenly, “Would be a lot more helpful if *you* could just tell me what the hell it is.”

“I’m a Practitioner, Jack,” Will said, strained, “not a walking Necronomicon.”

It was a silver lining, at least. Jimmy Price was not only an expert in his field but he was a committed expert, enough that people sometimes viewed him as a bit of a fanatic. He would be indispensable. The sunshine of earlier had given way to the clouds on the horizon, and now the grey and mustard tinted sky was a blanket waiting to shed. To chill the earth. It was reflected in the building they climbed towards, stairs long and low and wide, all glass and steel like a mirror. Jack’s silence was telling.

“Then I suppose that means it is something bad, this Seal,” Will said as they walked up the stairs together.

“Not necessarily.”

“Tell me Jack,” Will said as they walked through a concrete archway, past the guards there, into the well lit atrium, “if you were going to drop your life’s work to run after a photograph, would it be a good photograph or a bad photograph?”

Crawford didn’t reply, and thus had *replied*. In turn they went through the rigmarole of the security gate, *scanned, patted down and emptied of anything they deemed unnecessary.* Will came out the other end feeling lighter and yet heavier.

“Thought you wouldn’t have wanted to accompany me here, of all places,” Jack said as they continued together.

“I get a kick out of it,” Will lied with an acid smile, “still glad you brought me?”

“Not really,” Jack sighed tightly.

The Registry was not somewhere he believed anyone was happy entering, human or otherwise. Though the otherwise would be less thrilled, he admitted. If Quantico was a seventies concrete block, the Registry was a glass and steel construction of the future. It was easy to see the divide between the government bureau with its limited resources and the Registry with its privately funded coffers, dripping in money from the private security force to the thumb print scanners on the doors to the LED screens in the lifts and the marble on the floor.

“Seems like there’s still a heavy pay cheque in hunting and skinning,” Will said, voice taught, as they emerged into a long corridor, black and white flecked floor shining under the delicate lights.

At the far end were cathedral windows, stained glass shining through onto the white walls. Their crest of the vitruvian man, and beneath the coda: ‘*ad imaginem dei*’. Will snorted and shook his head as he and Jack walked towards the only other feature of the corridor, the long low receptionist’s desk in teak and with a young man sitting up in his seat, prim and proper and groomed to within an inch of his life, skin a wonderful caramel, dark eyes and hair. Will wondered how far the Registry’s motto applied to it hiring process. He wondered if being a good looking, well kept individual was part of the contract.

“We’re here for an appointment with the Amanuensis,” Jack stated.

“Can I please take you names?” the man’s voice was radio quality.

“Jack Crawford, and this is...”

A shrill ring that made Jack's lips thin as he fished in his pocket for the offending phone. He lifted it to his ear and spoke shortly, then lifted a finger at Will and walked further down the corridor; *something serious*, Will thought. It was just as he had needed it to be. Will looked to the man and locked eyes.

"I think he was supposed to say my name," he said smoothly, garnering a quick, easy laugh from the receptionist, "Will Graham."

"Ah, yes, I have your appointment here," the man said as he typed.

"Yikes," Will said, sucking in air through his teeth and aiming to look as contrite as possible, "I hope he isn't going to make us late. Who is it today?"

"Your Aman will be Dr. Unger."

"I mean, I don't mind going in ahead," Will said, touching at his chest, "if that would help us both out?"

The receptionist hesitated for only a moment, during which Will leaned both his forearms on the counter, cocked his head and *smiled*. The man blinked, before ducking his head and laughing. When their eyes met again, Will could feel it.

A stickler for satin sheets, he could feel them against his back as his skin dented where he bit at his finger, wicked machinations going on below the belt. It wouldn't be the first time he'd screwed a client.

"Go right ahead," the receptionist said, pushing a button to his right that made the door behind Will click.

"You're a doll," Will winked, skipping in through before Jack noticed.

The Scriptorium was utterly quiet, enough that when the door closed behind him it became a low lit sensory depravation tank. His ears needed to pop, making him work his jaw to try and equalise the pressure. The room was long and low ceilinged, soft grey carpet beneath his feet and strip lights above. On either side of him were rows of cream coloured cubicles, like the teeth of some massive beast long dead. Walking forwards Will thought he might be able to hear his feet against he ground, but wasn't truly sure as he swung his head left to right, checking the name tags on the doors. When he found his it was instinct to knock, but he was sure that would be frowned upon. Instead there was a button by the door that simply said '*press for entry*'.

Will did as he was told. The door slid open. A faint smell of disinfectant leached out.

Inside it was bright enough for him to squint. Two chairs in a white box, one already occupied. For a quick flash Will thought he could see *Hannibal Lecter's office, two black chairs facing one another, between which truth fed one way and not the other*. The thought was intrusive and he wished it gone, not to think of him here, not now when he needed to concentrate.

Instead, when he blinked he found himself faced with a woman in her fifties, hair in a strict bob, skin sallow and clothing utterly, depressingly the same white tone as the walls. Her blue eyes crept up to him slowly as he took the seat across from her.

"Dr. Unger," Will greeted her.

“G-R to L-A,” she said mechanically, “do these parameters meet your standards?”

“Uh, yes,” Will said, startled, “they do. But I was hoping for files,” he frowned, looking around the utterly empty room.

“All information will be given through this conduit,” she said, placing her hand on her chest, “no information will leave without sanction.”

“You,” Will said, taken aback, “*you* are the…ok,” he took a breath and rubbed at his mouth, “no wonder the Registry has never been hacked.”

“All files are sacrosanct,” she said as if it were words she spoke in prayer, “and all identities my priority. G-R to L-A. Please state the name.”

It was destined to fail before he even tried, but it didn’t stop him. When he delved in against the mind of the woman it was like falling through a library codex that he had no knowledge of, no way to interpret. Her mind was a well, hundreds of miles deep and hundreds of miles wide. Numbing and disorientating, trying to decipher her neural network from scratch like a child crawling around with their eyes on the ground. Will found himself pulling back sharply, rubbing at his temple. He shot the door a quick look and hoped he had enough time before Jack walked in and stripped him of his one chance.

“Hobbs, Abigail,” he said, hoping he wasn’t screwing himself by putting her first in his clandestine search; *no computer, no paper trail,* he told himself as the woman closed her eyes and went completely silent.

After a few minutes the woman opened her eyes, looked straight at him and said.

“No known file. Do you have the correct name?”

“Oh, no, I guess I don’t,” Will said, hands bunching to fists on his thighs; I should have fucking known, he thought, unregistered. Why is she unregistered? What is there to know about you Abigail, that you don’t want on record?

He wasn’t sure, in that moment, why he wavered. The next name he needed to say was obvious, essential. This was as close to the truth as he was ever going to get. Jack’s lax nature mixed with his guilt at the trauma he had caused, that was what had brought them here. Without him Will knew he’d never get this close again. Never get this chance again.

“What about...” he hesitated, blinking, *are you sure you want to, are you really sure you want to know this*, “Graham, William.”

The answer came back almost immediately, enough to make his face fall.

“Unauthorised access,” Unger said, “you do not have clearance to access that file.”

“I don’t have *clearance*?” Will repeated, laughing, stunned, “What are you...what clearance would I need to have?”

“You are unauthorised,” she repeated.

“But I, that’s who *I am*. That is me. I can’t access my own file? *Why*?”

“You do not have the correct clearance.”

He couldn’t quite accept it, enough that he opened his mouth to ask again. Only the truth stopped him, *that madness was doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different result* . What the hell would they have on me that’s so god damned secret? he thought angrily. As he sat, arms folded around himself, slouched in his seat, he wondered if there was relief peppered in with his shock and anger. *It could be worse, Will, you could have found out everything, and then where would you be? You could have found out everything and then your fantasy of a family would be nothing but stories.*

“How about Grey-Pelt? Milly Grey-Pelt,” Will asked coldly. The case was all he had now, the only other way forward, “It will be her pack name,” he added. The woman ignored him, closing her eyes once more. When the door opened with a soft rush of air and Will looked up to find Jack.

“Couldn’t wait huh?” he said accusingly.

“Quiet,” Will said, putting his finger to his lips and jerking his head to the Aman.

Jack looked furious at the order, but folded his arms and waited. When she finally reported, Will listened intently.

“The Grey-Pelts. Registered pack in Maryland. Jacksonville area. Twelve members. Nine adults, three cubs.”

“Are any of the others named Michael?” Will asked.

“Negative,” she replied, making Will sit back. Even past the ire and the confusion at his situation, the workings of a theory niggled at the edges of his mind.

“Can we have her contact information?” Jack cut in before Will could ask anything further.

“Of course. Sidecar Bar and Grill, Jacksonville. If they wish to talk to you there, then she will make herself available.”

“With all due respect...” Jack scoffed, clearly not thinking about respect at all.

“We are unable to divulge home address or subjects of communication,” Unger stated, “do you have any further queries?”

“None,” Will said, standing and ushering Crawford out of the door.

They left as quietly as they had arrived, enough that exiting the Scriptorium and going back into the receptionist’s hallway was like walking into a busy airport in comparison. Jack was suspiciously quiet, but Will knew he was aware of the discrepancy, *of how long Will had been gone compared to how much information he could have gathered in Jack’s absence*. It amazed him the man hadn’t started a tirade already. Will rubbed at his face, trying to ignore the sudden and invasive thoughts of the receptionist as the man looked to him, sly smile in place. The surprise and the fear still clung to him, like strands of spiders web stretching and bending and wrapping around.

What’s so god damned special about you, Will Graham? He asked himself, dread nipping at his footsteps.

“Get what you came for?” he was asked.

“Sure did,” Will said, so lost in thought that he didn’t realise it wasn’t the receptionist who had spoken.

Will was forced to jerk to a stop before he walked straight into the man before him. Backing up was involuntary, but necessary. The man watched him closely. In his peripheral he noticed Jack stand next to him; it felt like ownership, enough to rankle, to make his skin prickle. He felt like telling Crawford that his protection wasn’t tantamount to possession. But then between Jack Crawford of the FBI and Marcus Hopkins of the Registry, he felt like a shiny toy being fought over by toddlers.

“Graham,” Hopkins said smoothly, flashing his regular, white teeth against his pale skin and lips, blonde hair making his complexion all the more waxen, “what a coincidence. I saw a delightful article about you the other day.”

“Hopkins,” Will returned, his worry making him quick to *bare teeth*, “you have a terrible taste in online journalism. Who knew the vice president of the Registry reads the *Tattler*. How humiliating.”

“Oh, everyone has their vices,” the man said, barely reacting, “Agent Crawford, it’s always a pleasure.”

“Of course, Mr. Hopkins,” Jack said professionally, though Will could feel the obsequiousness; it made him sneer, “is there something we can do for you?”

“Just saw you and your little pet had logged in at the front desk,” Hopkins said as if he were describing a day out to the beach; Will narrowed his eyes at the moniker, “It’s been what, two years? Didn’t know you were ready to go back into the field, what with all those tricky problems you’ve been having.”

“Not as many as you’d think,” Will said, “not as many as you, what with all that blood on your hands.”

“Considering we can safely proclaim to have wiped out nearly every known full blooded Unnatural in the United States, perhaps you have a point,” the man said unpleasantly, “Well, anyway, I thought I’d stop by and see how you were.”

“Just peachy,” Will cut in before Jack could answer.

“Really? That’s not what the newspapers are saying.”

“They’ll print anything these days, won’t they?” Will said acerbically, eyes lifting to focus in on Hopkins’ deep blue gaze.

The man’s smile was taught like piano wire. In there, Will thought, is it in there? All the access to me that I don’t even have? What do you know? What do you *know?*

“I do hope you’re not thinking of trying your tricks on me, Graham.”

“If I ever feel like diving into a sewer, I’ll let you know,” Will replied lazily.

“My apologies,” Jack said, nudging Will towards the elevators, “we’d best be getting back to work.”

“Not at all,” Hopkins watched them go, “it’s always a pleasure, Will. If you ever feel the need to donate yourself to the research facilities downstairs, you know where I am.”

“What, the big room with the manacles on the walls? Oh, Marcus,” Will shook his head and pouted his lip, “when *are* we just going to fuck and get this over with?”

“How gauche,” Hopkins replied dismissively as he headed to the door to the Scriptorium.

“You can cut the sexual tension with a knife,” Will stage whispered to the receptionist who smiled and laughed on instinct, before falling utterly silent as his boss sent him a stony glare.

Once the elevator arrived, Will stepped into it backwards, keeping his eyes on Hopkins as Hopkins kept his on Will. The stare was only broken when the elevator doors closed.

Despite his loose threats he hoped he never found out what the research facility looked like.

“Just can’t help yourself, can you?” Jack was saying, clearly furious, when Will tuned back in.

“Ah,” Will shrugged, “the dying man doesn’t fear the cliff Jack. Can’t I have a little fun?”

“Not at my expense,” Crawford said, glaring.

“When the hell did he get to be so fucking high up?” Will asked no one, “The last time I saw him he was a lab tech, petitioning the FBI for Lass’s...remains. If there’s one thing I can thank you for Jack, it’s making sure that she didn’t end up at the end of a scalpel blade in this hellhole.”

“Trying to say I’m not a complete monster?” Jack asked, with no love lost.

“Spoil sport,” Will said through gritted teeth.

“*I haven’t* seen *her! How many times do I have to tell you? We’ve been working archives, looking over cold cases, for days now. You know that, why are you asking me? You put us down there! We’ve been living in a box underground, we don’t talk to anyone about the case, we weren’t supposed to be involved any more. She works, she comes straight home, she showers, she feeds her stupid cat, she goes to sleep. Rinse repeat. She can’t have found anything relevant, she can’t have tried to...”*

Sitting down didn’t calm his nerves, it made his nausea worse. Leaning forwards Will pressed his elbows to his knees, hands clasped to his mouth, crushing against his lips. His heart was beating thick and slow against his chest, a rhythm he couldn’t rely on, irregular, confused. He felt dizzy. There were people, lots of people, moving around through the rooms of Miriam Lass's apartment and he hated it.

But it wasn't crowded in here at least, the room in which they sat. Not this one, the bedroom. *No one but him and Jack. No one but the sick and the dying. Miriam’s home was warm and comforting, simple and unfussy but with a hint of messiness that used to drive him crazy. Now there were people here, touching all of her things, turning out neat chests of drawers, photographing and tagging. He couldn’t stand it, what it meant.* Vultures picking over bones.

They hadn’t found the cat.

"*I can't...*" *he swallowed, closing his eyes, "she didn't say anything to me about going anywhere. She* didn't."

"*This is important, I don't have time for your bullshit," Crawford was behind him, he could hear the words but feel the presence more, "dammit Will! She could be..."*

"*She isn't. She's just," he stalled, "isn't, she can't be. It doesn't make sense."*

"*Take a look, please."*

It might have been the first time he'd heard his boss say the word. Please *. It was unnerving. Made him realise how crazy he must sound, how shaky and manic. Will felt sick, standing up suddenly enough that Jack pulled back from him. He reached out and offered his hand, keeping his eyes averted. Jack huffed out a sigh but handed over the piece of paper regardless. Will felt it touch his fingers and blinked stiffly, wrapping them around it as if it were possibly dangerous,* like a spider around a wasp.

The logic came to the fore as a barrier, a hand to hold him apart from the horror of the situation. Focus, *it demanded.*

The paper was thick, good quality. It had been folded, twice; once horizontal, once vertical. She had kept it hidden somewhere, not part of the file *. Maybe in her bag if the curled corners were anything to go by. As he unfolded it revealed a classical drawing, something that tickled at the back of his memory.* A man, pushed through with a multitude of weaponry, a corpse mapped out in anatomy, opened up for everything inside to be removed and described in detail *. It appeared to have been ripped from somewhere, the page torn partway down the middle. The text was in medieval Latin. It appeared to be some sort of manuscript reconstruction, a medical document perhaps. It was then he realised that it wasn't paper at all, it was vellum. The pock marks of skin gave it away, pores where the hairs had once been.*

"*You any idea what this is? Is it even relevant?" Jack was asking.*

"I'm not sure," Will said, frowning, feeling the intent in the drawing, the heavy sinking feeling that it transmitted to his nerves, "where did you find this?"

"*It was in her purse," Jack said, "on the coffee table."*

"*Her purse is here," he said, "her phone, her wallet, her keys," he closed his eyes and heard the tremor in his hands as the vellum shook and rattled, "oh god. This isn't it. This can't be what it is."*

"*I don't have time for your feelings. Neither does she. We need answers!"*

"*Part of it is missing," he managed to breathe out through a throat thick with fear, "There's something missing from the top of the page," he ran his fingers over the frayed edge, "did you find anything that would..."*

"*Sir," came a voice from the doorway; Will stalled, watching as Crawford walked to the young agent, "they've found something."*

It should have been easier. That's what he told himself, over and over. It should have been easier than this. When they drove to the site Crawford kept his foot on the gas like a madman. Hope*, Will had thought. It had been hope that gave Jack impetus, that made him tick, that gave him the will*

and the need to carry on at all costs. To believe that if he drove fast enough, if he shouted loud enough, if he pushed Will hard enough, that everything would work out just as he hoped.

What is it you have? He asked himself as Jack slammed on the brakes and leapt from the car. What is it that makes you tick, Graham, when you always know. You always know. *Know that it was over. Know that it was all over for her and for him and for the investigation. As he followed, walking through the mess of security, the flashing lights from police cars, under the crime scene tape, up the steps, past the guarding police officers looking worried and unnerved, he found it sitting incongruously on top of a balustrade at the head of the stairway by the park bench where they had sat two days prior to have lunch.*

They had talked about her family. About her brother's birthday. She had asked him what she should buy for a man that didn't like gifts. Will had told her she was asking the wrong guy and she had laughed. Now it was soiled, the air heavy and oppressive.

A sign.

A curse.

A testament to his failure.

An implement of torture.

The Chesapeake Ripper had torn open his world and emptied out this morsel of agony, as if daring him to pick it up and swallow it whole .

"*Jesus Christ," Jack was saying, shocked, sickened, turning away on the spot and rubbing at his forehead before covering his eyes.*

The arm had been severed just below the elbow. The fingers were curled delicately, nails unpainted but clipped and manicured beautifully. And at the curve of her wrist, there, the large freckle she had sometimes worried about enough to think of going to the doctor. On the underside of the forearm, the scar she'd told him her brother had caused when she was four, so faded now against the pallor of dead skin. Will found himself walking forwards with his hand out. It seemed right, wasn't it, to greet her? Slip his fingers into hers and hold them tightly. He brought his other hand over, to clasp them close.

"*Where has he taken you?" Will leaned in, whispering, smelling the ammonia, the decay, "you can tell me. You have to tell me. Come on," he could tell he was raising his voice because people were coming now, rushing, he could hear them, "tell me! Fucking tell me! Tell me where you are!"*

Hands around his shoulders, Jack urging him to let go, feeling her fingers slip away as he was pulled back, legs crumpling beneath him. Will sucked in a rasping breath and screamed.

The sound of the windscreen wipers kept his thoughts in beat, *thump whine, thump whine.* The snow had finally arrived, falling on top of that which had not yet melted. The greying slush on the roads was piled up like sand banks, making their journey seem predestined, like a leaf floating down a river. With every wipe of the blades the vibration rattled through his system; Will liked to imagine it could travel through his mind.

Let the pendulum swing. Only he wasn't sure what it would leave if it did, what it would leave behind as a nugget of his own truth. *The core of Will Graham, exposed and bare*. The thought scared him. Shaking his head he focused on the road, running endlessly beneath his tires.

Not that serenity was attainable when the source of the irritation was so close by.

"Could you maybe not just," Will leaned over to flick the heater on, hot air blowing out in a rush, "sit there in silence? You're making my mind itch."

A glance, a twitch to his lips and a hand reaching out to stem the flow of the fan heater down to a soft hushing, and Hannibal Lecter said his first words to him that day. Considering Will had picked him up twenty minutes prior, it was an achievement by his standards. Will was sure he wouldn't be rude to say the man liked the sound of his own voice.

"I thought you appreciated silence," Lecter said; he had been sitting still, eyes closed and head back against the headrest.

"Yeah, I'm starting to realise it's not all it's cracked up to be," he muttered, turning out as the lights changed, "you didn't even bother to tell me why you're here."

"And yet you conceded without explanation."

"Not without," Will said quickly, "I'm asking now, aren't I?"

"Jack Crawford is currently indisposed, and your delightful colleagues are preparing for the arrival of you fifth band member. Five is a terribly odd number, I hope it does not cause friction."

"Then maybe you could add yourself to the mix and even it out again," Will said, then realised what he had said, "since that's apparently a thing," he added facetiously.

"Much like yourself I doubt I have been given the choice. Jack Crawford wants me to make sure you are of sound mind and body," Lecter closed his eyes once more, "and apparently visit bars in Jacksonville."

"Can't take credit for things you agreed to without me. Or take the flack, whichever. What are you smiling about?"

"Peeking behind the curtain. Curious how the FBI goes about its business when it isn't kicking in doors."

"I don't need you breaking me down to a crumb of FBI procedure. Honestly, I probably won't be a good example if that's all you're here for."

The city gave way to the suburbs gave way to the forest. The day continued to darken to a sullen grey. The snow stopped, leaving them bereft of the *thump whine* . Without it Will felt the silence crawling over his skin, *the trick of the insects up and down over the hairs on his arms*. He considered turning the radio on but passed over the choice. Lecter critiquing his choice in music might have ended in him throwing the man from his truck for good.

"So," he said as he slowed down to a standstill, cursing the midday traffic, "what's in this for you?"

Lecter, whose eyes had been fixed on the world outside the window since their conversation had run dry, blinked languidly and turned to address him.

“Is this how you base all interactions? On a barter system?”

“Professionally,” Will explained, “no one gives anything away for free.”

“I am being paid,” Lecter stated as if it were obvious.

“Yeah, and you don’t look like you could use the money,” Will said derisively, “Alana told me you only take select clients, and I’ve seen your house, your wardrobe, your car. You don’t do this for the pay cheque.”

“Not all pay is monetary. The psychology of the supramundane. It is a fascinating subject through which I make my mark on the scientific community.”

“I’ve read your papers. A Counselling Approach to the Parapsychological Experience.”

Will put his foot down and did his best to contain the irritation of how slow they were crawling forwards. In the last leg of their journey they had hit a traffic jam, one he couldn’t see ahead to gauge the length of. There was a need to blast the horn just to vent a little of his building frustration.

“Your thoughts?” Lecter asked.

“It was dry.”

“Science is rarely poetic in journal form.”

“I preferred the one about Science and Supernature. It was more on the mark.”

Putting on the brakes again Will let out a harsh sigh and sat back, chewing at the inside of his mouth. Lecter’s lack of reply drew his eye. The man was watching him intently as Will wiggled the gear stick into neutral.

“What?” Will asked.

“I would prefer any commentary you would make to be straight forward.”

“You think I’m trying to dismantle you like you’re dismantling me?”

“I understand you never liked to be alone in a room with Alana either. This must be difficult for you, but there is no need for us to be enemies. I would rather avoid the tit for tat, if possible.”

Curling his hands around the steering wheel didn’t help. The worn material creaked and Will wished he’d risked the criticism and just put on the damn radio. Now they were talking, and Will didn’t have a good enough reason to stop.

“My whole life has been spent being picked apart by others. All pulled apart and swallowed. I’m used to it, though. Or I thought I was. It’s not the same with you.”

“Oh?”

Had been a long time since he’d had to explain. It hit home how few times he’d had to in the past couple of years. The last had been Beverly and Zeller mere days ago. Now it was the man who sat,

prim and proper in his three piece, Windsor knot tie and pocket square, in the passenger seat of his truck.

Skin against his palm, soft pressure without consequence.

“Did Jack even tell you? I don’t know, I always just assume he has,” Will stopped; Lecter’s blank stare gave nothing away, “I can read people’s thoughts.”

“Then I shall add it to the list,” Lecter’s mouth ticked up at the edges and, without wondering why, Will laughed.

“You’re making me sound pathological.”

“Aren’t we all?” the man said easily, “But you have not elaborated on why you are telling me this now.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The thought was still so absurd, so bizarre, that to an extent Will thought it might have been some sort of aberrant, psychological problem. That there must be a reason beyond the physical that explained why the inside of this man’s mind was utterly inaccessible. He couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“Is this something you had passed to you genetically?”

“Asking if my parents were also freaks of nature?” Will rebutted.

“The people around us explain us in detail, a dish under the microscope. As we seem to be in the mood to share?”

“What gave you that impression?” Will asked acidly, rolling his eyes when Lecter merely licked his lips and let out a puff of air; it was a tricky subject, too tricky and personal to speak about so casually. He knew that, and he was sure Lecter would to. He was observant, irritatingly so, enough that it stung to know that the man was throwing out questions with such abandon. *Picking apart, pulling and swallowing whole*. Will was upset at himself for letting his guard down around the man’s charm; the spite rose in him like a gorge in his throat, coaxing out the bitter and the toxic, “Alright. My father is a travelling salesman. He was barely ever home and, when he was, all him and my mom would do was fight. She’s a school teacher in Mississippi, kindergarten. I’m nothing like either of them and we don’t speak unless it’s on holidays or birthdays. Happy?”

“Should I be?” Hannibal asked.

“Most people are when they get what they want,” Will said tightly, frustration making the easy transfer to anger, “you said we seemed to be in the mood to share. So share.”

“My parents?” Lecter said, brows raised when Will glared in response, “Honestly, I am not entirely certain I remember them clearly enough to offer a description. They both died when I was very young.”

The brakes were applied a little too harshly, too quickly, sending them both forwards with force before jerking back into their seats. Lecter had reached up to brace against the dashboard with his

hand. Will stared straight ahead, breath stuck in his throat. Coughing was an easy excuse to cover his mouth, hide his reaction behind the palm of his hand.

“Sorry,” he said softly.

“Quite alright, the traffic is very changeable today.”

“I meant about your parents.”

“Ah, of course. Very kind of you but it is an old wound, well healed. It does not distress me to talk about it.”

“I shouldn’t have...that was unprofessional of me.”

“Therapy is designed to bring out the demons,” Lecter said breezily, “I have had worse, believe me.”

“How did they..?” Will swallowed, trying to ignore the niggling sensation of guilt wriggling down his throat at the aborted question as they began to drive forwards once more, the traffic thinning out.

“They were murdered.”

The admission sat like a monument to their agreement. *No lies*. He was unable to stop himself looking Lecter in the eyes; the man was calm, face a mask of serenity as always. His tranquillity seemed to bring out the indigence Will thought he should feel, “did they catch them?” were the only words he felt able to say.

For a moment Lecter’s eyes narrowed, regarding him with the sort of curiosity that spoke of realisation. Like a man seeing himself in a mirror and understanding how he might look to others.

“They were caught,” Lecter said, nodding.

“Ok. That’s good,” Will said awkwardly, trying to think of something to say that wouldn’t be the equivalent of his foot fitting perfectly into his mouth. When he realised where they were he was overjoyed, “hey, I think this is it…oh *fuck’s sake*.”

Part of him would feel guilty later for being glad that, on pulling in to the *Sidecar* bar and grill, there was a fight in full swing. Right there and then it was an easy reason to grab his badge and run as far from the problem his misplaced anger had made for him as possible.

The closer he ran, the more obvious it became that this wasn’t a fight between gangs, or even a fight between warring packs. Or even a fight at all, really. Fights had to have two participants. This was a one sided shit show. The spray paint on the red brick wall of the diner made that obvious. *DIE FREAKS*. Not very imaginative, but then Will thought that the four skinheads, three currently kicking the living daylights out of something on the ground while the fourth held a gun at the small group of people near the bar’s entrance weren’t probably looking to ignite the imagination with their literary prowess.

“You all just stay right where you are,” the man with the gun was grinning at the people near the bar while the sounds of feet connecting with a warm body, grunts and coughs and jeers, continued behind him.

“Hey!” Will shouted as he marched towards them; the man with the gun was first, then the other three, turning on him like hyenas sensing the lion approaching, “Put it *down*,” he said, stopping just short as they grouped together, eyes filled with ready violence. They moved away to reveal a man on the ground, curled in foetal, bloodied and choking.

“Who the fuck are you?” the gunman asked aggressively, cocking his head.

And it was too much, too close. The smell of blood on the air. The easy, slick heat of their thoughts surrounding him like a carousel, spinning and bright, sending up flares. The layer of acceptability he wore like a mask was only skin deep after all. The smile on his face wasn’t pleasant, he knew, and the hand that had been reaching for his badge changed course. The holster was closer and the gun was more thematically appropriate. And at the time it seemed real and real and *real*. It was him, and he was ready. *Not the first time,* he could hear his own voice saying. *Do you consider yourself a killer*? *Lecter had asked.* Will knew the answer was more complex than he tried to make it out to be.

“Gentleman,” a sudden voice rang out, “this will all have to go in the report.”

That he had forgotten the civilian he’d brought into a crime in progress, Will was sure Jack was going to flay him alive. Right after he did the same to the man currently standing behind him, looking utterly unimpressed in his out of place attire, holding his overcoat up and shaking it before beginning to slide into the silk lined wool.

“What the hell is this?” another of the four idiots spoke up, voice rough with years of cigarettes.

“I did not expect this to be taking place when I arrived,” Lecter said; Will frowned, blinking, unsure what to do. *Another split-second decision that he was sure he’d regret*, “but the report will have to include all four of you. Most disappointing on a routine inspection.”

“This is horse shit, what the hell is this..!” one of the men spat, advancing.

“Nothing to do with you,” the gunman said suddenly, his eyes seeming to comprehend the situation, lowering his weapon, “and *shut up.* I’m sorry sir, I didn’t, *we* didn’t mean to step on the Registry’s feet. Right boys?”

“Registry?” one of them repeated, swallowing, “Y-yeah, that’s right.”

“We’ll be going,” the gunman said with a servile nod.

Will watched them leave, some of them still dragging their feet but the gunman kept them in line. They piled into a pick-up truck and backed out roughly, tires squealing along with their vile laughter as they pealed out onto the road. Will committed their licence plate to memory, watching them as they left. The sound of running feet brought his eyes back to the bar, finding several people rushing towards them. Will leaned down to take a look at the injured man on the ground.

“Don’t touch him!” a young man with long dark hair was shouting.

“Back off!” another woman was right behind him.

“Ok, alright,” Will raised his hands and backed away, “look, we’re not here to hassle you.”

“Shut it, Registry pig,” the young man snarled.

“Oh, right, that,” Will said, giving Lecter a stare as he dug out his badge.

“Don’t even think about it,” the woman growled as Will put his hand in his pocket; she watched him like a hawk as he slowly, very slowly, pulled his wallet from his jacket and tossed it to her. When she opened it her eyes were suspicious as they flicked back and forth from the badge to Will.

“Assumptions can be very useful,” Hannibal said, “to the simple minded.”

“We’re not Registry, believe me I’m about as far from it as you can get.”

“Christ, Mill,” the young man with dark hair had bent down to help his injured friend; he had managed to pull up into a sit, showing his broken nose and face as a mess of contusions and bruised blood, “this is bad.”

“If you would permit me,” Lecter said, “I have medical training.”

She watched them both for a tense couple of seconds before chucking Will his badge back; as he caught it she nodded.

“*Mill*,” the young man said appalled, eyeing Lecter.

“Just let him Felix,” she said stoutly; Felix backed off as Lecter hunkered down to help.

“We should get him inside. Do you have any first aid materials?”

“In the office, behind the bar,” she nodded, “Felix, help Jones in.”

Inside the bar there were five more people, all looking ready for trouble but, simultaneously, dreading it. Will was glad. It made their entrance all the easier for it. They laid the injured man, Jones he was sure she’d said, on a couch in the back office. Will wadded up his Jacket and put it under his head while Lecter was lead by Felix to get supplies. When the woman made to follow Will stopped her.

“You’re Milly Grey-Pelt?”

“I’d say who’s asking,” she said, looking at him down her nose, “but then I already know who you are now don’t I, witch.”

“Technically I’m a warlock, if you want to be politically correct,” Will said facetiously, face shifting, falling into a malaise of the contrite “I need to talk to you. About Mike.”

“Mike?” she asked sharply, “You’ve found him? Is he ok?”

Taking a breath, Will shook his head. This wasn't his forte, he wasn't tactful enough. For an instant Will thought of Lecter, the man's calm repose, his seemingly endless ability to be whatever another person wanted or needed of him at that time. As she licked her lips and looked down, hands on her hips, Will tried his best to tap into it, to try on his esssence like a blanket around his shoulders.

“I’m so sorry," he was able to say it with the strength she would need, and not the culpability he felt, "we found him in his trailer.”

“How?” she asked, voice croaky with emotion.

“He was killed,” he didn't mince words because doing so would only cause more hurt; *it was odd to hear himself say it, so soon after Lecter’s confession*. Would she be feeling the same indigence, the same remorse that Will had himself? It can’t be the same, he thought, it isn’t the same. No grief was replicable, not truly

“Oh my god,” she said, walking out into the bar and sitting down; Will took the chair across from her and waited respectfully. Putting her elbows on the table she put her hands over her face and held them there.

Sunshine on water, hands on her shoulders as she leaned into him, a small life budding inside her, a moment she would cherish. Will blinked, looking away. The memory was pure, too personal. He’d had enough of seeing, enough of hearing, enough of other’s broken lives. He itched at his neck and allowed Lecter's influence to keep himself calm.

“I knew something was wrong,” she said as she brought her hands back down flat on the tabletop, “he never stays away this long. Even when we...”

“When you?” Will prompted.

“We had a fight. But he never stays away for longer than a cycle,” her voice broke and she sat back, choking on a smirk, “fuck. This is crazy. You said he was killed? Then why did you let those assholes go! Aren’t they fucking suspects?”

“Milly,” he said, trying to think about how to say it, “Mike wasn’t killed as part of a hate crime. It was...ritualistic.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked quietly, watching him intently with husky blue eyes.

“You’ve seen the newspapers,” he said.

“Oh my, *oh my god*,” she breathed out. When one of her pack stood up to approach she lifted a hand, stopping him. He sat down slowly and Milly stared at the table, eyes hard, “they said that you people didn’t know who was doing this.”

“We don’t,” Will admitted, making her glare at him, “that’s why I need to ask for your help.”

“Anything,” she said, surprising him.

“Ok,” Will said, looking up as Hannibal reappeared, his overcoat and suit jacket removed, cuffs rolled up and blood smudged on his shirt sleeve. He was sure the man should look defiled by it, but in a way it came across as innately natural. *Unadulterated.* Taking a breath he tried to focus, looking back to Milly as Felix offered Lecter a drink, “Milly, why wasn’t Mike registered?”

She hesitated, and then, “He didn’t believe in the idea of the pack,” she said, unable to scrape all of the venom from her voice, “he was the lone fucking wolf, always. Couldn’t bring himself to be a Grey-Pelt, even if it meant he couldn’t have me as his.”

“You were together?” Will asked.

“We were bonded,” she said tightly, clasping her hands.

“Were there any kids?”

“How did you..?” she stared at him with eyes that had seen the worst in people for too long, “no there weren’t any kids. Like I said,” she licked at her teeth, “Mike was a loner. He didn’t need anyone, and so no one needed him.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I don’t want your sorrys,” she said, catching his stare and holding it, “I want your assurance. You’re going to get whoever did this.”

“I’m going to try,” he said, standing; as he walked to the bar Will frowned, a light going off in the dark places of his mind. He turned back, “I guess you get a lot of occult in your place, frequent visitors?”

“We’re open to all kinds, I guess,” she shrugged, wiping at her eyes roughly, “look, I’m sorry about the witch thing. I’m just on edge.”

“No worries,” Will said, waving it away, “actually I was wondering if you’d heard anything, about non-registered’s going missing?”

“Uh, no, not me anyway,” she said, “but I can ask around for you. If you think it will help, I’ll do it.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’d appreciate it.”

At the bar, Lecter was speaking with Felix and another young woman with blonde hair cut short and spiky, denim jacket covered in patches. Ease and confidence, two words Will couldn’t associate with himself he could most certainly slap onto Lecter. From calming rampant violence to speaking to strangers of all walks of life to manipulating with ease, the man remained utterly calm throughout. Having tapped into only a tithe of it, wearing it like a suit, *pulling it apart and swallowing it whole,* he felt like he might know what it was to have it. Perhaps to keep it, like a memory. But then it wouldn’t be real, it wouldn’t be him. He wanted it to be, wanted to have it be as natural as breathing. Enough that those eyes would look at him again like they had when Will had asked, *‘did they catch them?’*.

Recognition. *Being seen.*

“We need to go,” Will said, reaching out and touching…

Reaching out and touching. It came so naturally that it was a shock to the system. *Natural but unnatural*. Reaching out and touching the forearm that rested on the bar, the hairs soft beneath his fingers. Lecter looked to him, what appeared to be a scotch in his right hand, and Will couldn’t help but pull his hand away.

“Is the boy ok?” he asked quickly as Lecter opened his mouth.

“It looked worse than it was. They will need to keep an eye on him, but there is no concussion. No internal bleeding, no broken bones. I have been assured he will fully heal on his next moon phase.”

“Just a couple of days,” the young woman said, shrugging, “he’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Will said grimly, “just a couple of days.”

Until the next.

When Will didn't take the turn off for down town, Lecter didn't comment. Will tried to tell himself that he preferred it that way, but in truth he would have loved for nothing more than to know what he was thinking. Their day together had been hardly conventional and yet there had been progress; *information he couldn't have gained without Lecter's help*. He could admit that, when he was feeling generous.

There was a growing lack of a need for communication between them, subtle signals. Will liked to call it a professional working relationship. His subconscious liked to call it faith in others. Will liked to tell his subconscious to fuck off.

When they arrived at Quantico Will handled the call to Harry in order to get Lecter another temp pass for the evening. His lucky guess had paid off. Jack had already set up clearance, done all the paperwork, dotted all the i's. As he handed over his watch and his phone, Will was sure he caught the man smiling at him as he walked through the metal detector.

"Enjoying your peak behind the curtain?" Will asked as Lecter collected his effects.

"It is most educational."

"They'll be upstairs in the conference room," Will ignored the fingers of attachment tickling at his spine while they waited for the elevator, "need the projector. Price will want close ups."

"Then this seal you have found," Lecter said as he watched the readout tick down towards their floor, "it is most certainly significant then?"

"Ever have any dealings with occult rituals in your studies?" Will asked.

"Some. I was involved in a research paper regarding the use of the Gnostic circle in the transformation of consciousness."

"I know," Will said, stepping into the elevator, "I read it."

Lecter followed him as Will clicked for the third floor. Beyond Price's arrival, and beyond the advancements in the case, and even beyond what he had gleaned today from the surface of the victimology, Will hated that he knew nothing. Maybe, just maybe, he told himself, you need support in this one.

"I feel as if I have been taken apart, one journal article at a time," Lecter offered.

"I read fast."

"So it would seem. Then I am being brought in as a consultant?" Lecter looked amused.

"Sorry, didn't realise I had to pander to your ego to get results," Will smirked.

"It wouldn't hurt."

The smirk turned to a laugh, soft, barely there as he put his hands in his pockets and looked at his shoes. They walked without speaking, through corridors and past people whose thoughts flitted through his mind like butterflies passing, all tumbling wings, up and down, high and low. When

they reached the right door Will didn't bother to knock, just opened the door and ushered Lecter in ahead of him.

"...*and* this? I mean what the hell is this doing here?"

As soon as the voice blessed his ears, Will couldn't help but feel like he was stepping back. The more familiar players arrived, the more it was becoming a reconstruction of his breakdown. Pasting a smile on it and closing the door behind him was all he was capable of.

The projector was up and running, had been for a while considering it was now hot enough make the fan resound like a jet engine. Around the cramped conference table sat the players, Beverly and Zeller on one side, Jack on the other and Jimmy Price, as usual, up at the front by the screen with his hand against the image. The man was nothing if not tactile. As they joined the fray Will felt Jimmy's eyes snap to him like a fly on tape.

"Well as I live and breathe, Will Graham!" the man was grinning from ear to ear.

"You're late," Jack said, looking up and hesitating on seeing Lecter; it passed in a flash and Jack fell into step with the flawless professionalism, "Doctor Lecter, it's a pleasure to have you in on this."

"He's done work on transformational circles," Will leaned in behind Jack and explained before standing rigid and taking the hit as Jimmy Price grabbed him by the shoulders and gave him a shake.

Two and a half years sober and still all he could think about was how quick he could reach that numb fix if only he couldn't disappoint himself, or the kids. The index was meant to be his escape, but the thrill had brought him straight back into the pit.

"It's really good to see you," Price said, letting go when Will began to look completely uncomfortable.

"You too Jimmy," Will said genuinely.

"*Apologies, I have not introduced myself,"* Lecter was saying in the background, reaching out to shake Beverly's hand, then Zeller's.

"And what a doozy you sent me," Jimmy had turned to Jack.

"I can't take credit," Jack gestured to Will.

"Neither can I," Will shrugged, "I'm just the bloodhound."

"But if you don't know what it is, how did you find it?" Jack asked, eyes narrowed; Will had hoped they'd moved past the man's suspicion, but it seemed not.

"By accident," Will lied; he stared at Zeller as the man sat back in his chair and rubbed at his mouth. When Brian caught his stare he blinked before looking to Jack.

"Right," Zeller said glibly, "it was just luck. Will noticed the nicotine stains on the wallpaper and I noticed that the paper was loose on that wall."

“So really, *you* found this,” Jack said to Zeller as he indicated to the projected image.

“Does that matter?” Zeller frowned, though Will caught his panic.

“Jack we’ve been over this...” Will started.

“Perhaps we should consult the expert?” Lecter spoke up, transferring the attention of the room from Will to himself. It was a relief, but also left a sense of obligation tickling in his throat. Will looked away when Lecter caught his eye, staring at the projection as Hannibal offered his hand to Jimmy, “Mr. Price, a pleasure. Your work on the semiotic perspective of human subjectivity was most edifying.”

“Oh, well, always nice to meet a fan,” Price said, chipper as ever.

“If we could get back to the matter at hand,” Jack cut in.

“Right,” Jimmy said, “of course. Where was I?”

“We’ve been having some difficulty with the symbols,” Beverly leaned back in her chair and offered to Will and Lecter. "Apparently this circle can’t exist.”

“I didn’t say *can’t* exist,” Price said, flapping a hand, “well, ok I did. But I meant shouldn’t. Shouldn’t exist.”

Walking back to the projection Price pointed to the symbols in turn, clockwise, each one wrapped in a complex prison of interlinking lines and symbols which made up the ring itself. In the central area were three more circles, overlapping like a venn diagram.

“Each of these symbols on their own are fine,” he said, “but together like this? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“What difference does it make?” Jack asked scholastically, “if each symbol is representative of a meaning, an invocation, then wouldn’t a witch or warlock be able to convene their meanings, their powers? Bring them together to create something new?”

“Only if you think it fair to write a bible in gibberish and expect the angels to understand it,” Will said, shrugging; when Jack looked to him, eyes demanding an explanation, Will gestured to the image, “it’s fucking gibberish is what I’m saying.”

“He’s not wrong,” Price said.

“So you flew all this way to tell us we’re chasing a red herring?” Jack said through gritted teeth.

“Not a red herring,” Price beamed, “it's a semiotic *iconoclasm*.”

Will frowned as the image seemed to change before his eyes as Price spoke. No longer did the image show itself as a confusing mess of symbols and nonsense. Now it was something far more sinister.

“You think they broke it,” Lecter said, tipping his head to the right, eyes focused, “in order to put it back together again?”

“I think that whoever designed this seal isn’t an amateur. Far from it. If you want to play a piano backwards and upside down you first have to be an expert.”

“But what makes you think it isn’t just horse shit?” Zeller frowned, “That’s always an option isn’t it?”

“Because,” Price said, sending Zeller and incredulous look, “it makes sense, if you really look at it. Here,” he pointed to the top of the main, all encompassing circle, to a twirling, looping symbol “this is the Buddhist symbol for enlightenment. And this,” he moved to the next, “is sigma, beta, omega. It means knowledge. And this,” he moved to another on the opposite side, “is the seal of Melchizedek, it’s contextual in meaning but it *often* relates renewal or rebirth when placed in the seventh sector as it is here.”

“So you can read it then,” Zeller spoke up.

“What I’m trying to say is this thing, this frankenstein *thing* you have here, reads like a book if every word, from one to the next, was written in a different language, but the author was still trying to make sense of the meaning. It’s working its way through all the major players, gnosticism, buddhism, Christian, the Tora, the Quran, Greek, Hebrew. I just don’t really get why quite yet.”

“Well, how long until you think you might?” Jack asked, agitated.

“Can’t answer that one,” Jimmy said, looking contrite, “wish I could.”

“Great,” Jack said, scrubbing his hand across his mouth, down to fall off the end of his chin; the room seemed to sag and Will couldn’t help but sag along with it. All through his day, feeling the spectre of their ticking time clock looming over him, Price had been a shining light at the end of it all. A *hope*. Now all he’d been left with was more questions.

“There is one thing,” Price spoke up.

“Yeah, what’s that?” Jack asked, sighing.

“Regardless of whether or not I can make sense of it, I can tell you that it was never activated.”

Frowning, Will stared at Price. The room stared along with him. Jimmy remained utterly upbeat in the face of their confusion and irritation, and in truth Will couldn't help but enjoy it. Jimmy was nothing if not a little ball of frustrating energy in their deep, dark well.

“Never activated?” he muttered.

“Nope,” Price chirped.

“It was burned into the god damned wall,” Zeller said with frustrated disbelief.

“That’s just the epigraphical means,” Price rolled his eyes, “not the program that it would follow. You see here? In the centre?” he slapped his hand against a jutting symbol like a child’s arrow with protruding lines and crosses, “it’s Celtic Ogham, a rune for activation. When this seal runs its course then this rune would change,” he strode to the table and pulled a pen out of his pocket, and a receipt from his jeans, scrawling out a rune like a sideways hourglass split with a line, “to this. The rune of containment.”

“But you said yourself that this thing is a mess,” Zeller scoffed, “why’d you think it would conform to anything you know?”

“Because there are rules,” Jimmy said stoutly, “and even though this thing is an abomination of everything I’ve ever studied, the rules still apply, and they’ve followed the rules. Water falls out of the sky, fire burns, wind is just air moving from one place to the next. All symbols have a function, it’s just how it is.”

“But why go to the trouble of putting something so complicated in place,” Beverly asked the question they were all thinking, “if you’re never even going to use it?”

Standing up, Will moved to the front of the room. He could feel their eyes on him as he reached out gently and touched the projected image. *Remembering the pull of the original, tarnishing the wall, calling him forwards to touch, to connect*. He would have to thank Zeller, some day when he could summon the energy, for not letting him follow that path. The energy had been powerful but, even without the vision of the beast in the room, he’d known it was ominous.

“Some spells take only words, some take physical formations to work, like flesh or plant matter or fire or sacrifice, and some,” Will tapped the screen, “take the form of written seals. The more powerful the spell then the more complex the incantation, the more intricate and more detailed the circle. If the people doing these home invasions are targetting halfbreeds, maybe it’s some sort of...insurance? Could it be a seal of restraint?” Will asked as he pointed to the third sector, to a curving rune.

“Might be part of it, but it’s too complex for something so simple,” Price said casually.

“But how?" Jack asked, sitting forwads, "How would you even place something like that without the victim noticing? And how did they get access to the houses?”

“That’s a very good question,” Will muttered distractedly as he mapped the lay of a rune with his index finger, “but an even better one would be how did they incise the seal without someone proficient in witchcraft? It's like Jimmy says Jack,” he turned to the man, catching his eye, feeling his desperation, "if we can't crack this thing then lets go with what we know."

“So we’re looking for a Practicioner,” Jack patted his hand on the table, agreeing with Will by speaking his words as if they were his own creation, “with easy access to civilian homes, and maybe time alone once they were inside.”

“There is something all of these people have in common, something that connects them,” Will said “Maybe neighbours saw them come and go? Maybe repairmen, amenities workers, salesmen?”

“Katz, get on any work done at those addresses,” Jack issued the order seamlessly, “Zeller, I want you looking through the victim’s paperwork. See if there’s any correlation, same companies, same work done, same offers through the mail, anything. Price, I need you to work with this seal like it’s your own flesh and blood, understand?” he waited for Price to nod before moving his eyes to Will, “and you...”

And it was odd, he knew it was. Waiting, he was waiting for the words to come; the warpath, Jack was on it, like a general leading his troops into battle against the unknown. They were all falling in line, so easily that there wasn’t time to think of individual needs, individual wants. *The pack was running*. Will knew he was fading, knew that this would be his first step on the helter skelter downwards, and yet the words on Jack’s lips were all he was waiting for.

So when Lecter interrupted, Will felt it like whiplash.

“Apologies, for the interruption,” Lecter said calmly, “but may I have a word with you, Agent Crawford?”

“...This isn’t really the time, Doctor.”

“I am sure you would not benefit from listening to me placate you all evening,” the man said without deference but also without detriment, “may we speak in your office, perhaps?”

For a tense few seconds Jack Crawford looked like he might put up a fight. Though, Will thought, how anyone could fight against the serene professionalism of Hannibal Lecter he wasn’t sure. The man’s confidence was rapier sharp. Eventually Jack nodded, standing, and walked towards the door without further ado. The room watched them go, only breathing a sigh of relief once the door closed.

“Well what the hell was that all about?” Will asked no one in particular as Zeller pulled himself up out of his chair with a groan and Beverly stretched her arms above her head.

“I think your shrink is gonna regret pissing off Jack,” Zeller muttered as he headed for the door, “only room for one arrogant jackass in this outfit.”

“I don’t know,” Beverly smiled, “I kind of like him.”

“Then you can have him,” Will bit out.

When she leaned against the table, hair falling down past her shoulders, and smiled at him Will wished he didn’t know what she was thinking.

“I don’t think I’m his type,” she said, winking.

“It’s not like that, Jesus,” Will said fussily, “why has it all got to be about sex?”

“Most things are,” she shrugged, leaving as Jack returned; that Will found himself looking for Lecter when the man didn’t return only made him feel like a hypocrite.

Jack didn’t look angry but Will could tell he was holding back when he spoke, “Will, I need you to go home and get some rest.”

“*What*?” Will said incredulously, “Is that a joke?”

“Since when did I ever have a sense of humour, Graham,” Jack said sternly, “Go home. You’re no use to me burned out.”

“What so everyone else gets to work over-time but I’m too much of a fucking risk? Give me a break, I can work with Price on the seal...”

“Maybe you didn’t *hear* me,” Jack said sternly, “I know what I’m doing.”

“Or you’re just good at relaying orders,” Will bit out.

“Dr Lecter is an advisor. I’m taking him under advisement. *And*,” he added before Will could chime in, “this time I agree with him. I don’t want a repeat of last time, Will. Go home. Get some rest.”

Part of him wanted to argue until there was a fight, but the rest of him could see the point he was making. The last thing he wanted was for any more repetitions from his past. He left without too much of a fuss. Lecter was nowhere to be seen.

The sun set was wild, golds and reds across the world, a knitting pattern of clouds in the sky, criss-crossed. Will stopped at the top of the hill and looked down the last of the driveway. The lights were on and it spilled out onto the snow like fire. The trees were huddled in around like protectors, looming in at the roof, branches trailing like fingers. The snow seemed to glow and shift, shimmer, sparkle. *His ship on the sea*. Leaning forwards he placed his forehead against the steering wheel, took a long, deep breath and held it. If he listened hard enough, close enough, he thought he could hear the question. ***Hear her voice as if leaning in from the back seat, breath against his neck. Words as vibrations, no conscious understanding, only subconscious acceptance of the meaning.***

YOU DON'T DESERVE A LINEAGE. YOU ARE THE TREE WITHOUT BRANCHES.

"It's hard to shake off something that's already under your skin," he answered, voice soft with anxiety; he let out the handbrake and finished the journey, "you should know that."

Abigail was asleep on the couch when he entered, the TV still playing in the background, some bubblegum show he didn't recognise. The dogs were mainly sleepy, arranged around her on the floor, and a couple up at her feet. Buster was the first to wake, stretching and trotting over to greet him. Will hunkered down and rubbed the dog's fur as the mutt leaned against his leg. It was affirming. Grounding. Something he wanted, but wasn't sure he should have.

"Hey bud," he managed a smiled as Buster yawned, "miss me, huh?"

"I fed them."

Looking up he found Abigail, just her eyes and the top of her head watching him over the back of the couch. Her youth hit him, her innocence blurring into a need to protect. Only he knew it was more than that, it wasn't fair to lie to himself any more. *Not just a ward of Sanctuary.* She was brave in the face of fear, she was brave in the face of the unknown, she was brave in the face of what she was. She reminded him of what he wanted to be. Her and Lecter both.

"Thanks," he said, keeping his eyes on the dog, "you get dinner ok?"

"Yeah."

"Then you'd better get to bed before you end up on that couch all night," he said, standing, "I don't recommend it."

"Ok," she climbed up from the couch, shedding dogs and waking paws.

In the kitchen there were dishes, but he couldn't find the energy to wash them. Couldn't find the energy to eat his share of the mac and cheese he'd left for her in the fridge either. *Wanted a drink, but couldn't get one now that he'd emptied the emptys, glass bottles in the trash.* He followed her upstairs on hollow feet. *Two more days*. Listened to her giggle as the dogs crowded her in the bathroom while she brushed her teeth. *I'm so sorry,* he wanted to tell her, *I'm sorry that family isn't what you wanted even though you need it*.

Wanted to exonerate himself, to be exonerated, *to not have another wandering lost spirit summoned to the circle.*

The door creaked as she opened it, peering in. From his seat on the edge of the bed Will looked up, knowing his stare was looking inside, deep, lost.

“You ok?” she asked slowly.

“Yeah,” he nodded, trying to remain detached; it didn’t last. *Liar*. Will sighed, rubbing his palms together, “well, no, not really. Not...up to scrutiny right now.”

“That’s fair,” she shrugged, “just thought you looked...” she hesitated.

“What?”

“Lonely.”

“Lonely doesn’t matter. Lonely can be a friend.”

“I can help,” she said; when he opened his mouth she beat him to it, “you started this, you know.”

The laugh was genuine, and he thought it might have pushed the smile up into his eyes, “Yeah, I guess I did, huh? Thanks, sweetheart. I appreciate it.”

“Good,” she said, biting at her lip.

“You’d better get some sleep,” he said, swallowing down his fears, “if you can’t focus, you won’t learn anything tomorrow.”

She smiled with the quick ease of the youthful, able to bounce back from trauma, from upset, without any need to linger on the lasting harm. Her fingers gripped the door and she gave it a shake.

“*Thank you,”* she whispered before rushing out and closing the door behind her.

For him family had always been like an ill fitting suit, disconnected from the form it was trying to emulate. He was all the wrong sizes, but still he searched for the right tailor. He would have called it self harm, if he’d been a little more upset. Instead he called it desperation.

The phone was in his hand before he could overthink why it was a terrible idea. Rings like tolling bells, pealing out over a landscape that tried to ignore the call of the faithful.

“Will, is everything alright?” Lecter answered with a slight bleariness. *Did I wake you?* He almost asked. Before he could be drawn into the diversion he spoke the truth that was gnawing at him from the inside.

“I lied,” he said succinctly; there was a pause in which Will sniffed and laid back fully on the bed, “to you. Earlier. My father isn’t a travelling salesman. And my mother isn’t a school teacher.”

In his peripheral vision Will thought he might be able to see it. ***She sat in his chair, in the corner by the sewing machine. Guessing she was watching him, because he could not see her face. Hands grasping the chair arms. Judging, hating, wishing*.** She had known, the only other person

he'd ever told the truth to about his family, or lack thereof. Her spectre seemed to haunt the declaration of it.

"I feel like the priest behind the confessional," Lecter said, breaking the tension.

"Are you going to absolve my sins?" Will wished he could join in the joke but it was all too real.

"I feel protective of you, Will."

"I don't know if I deserve that. Your honesty burned mine," Will admitted, clearing his throat, "you stuck to your principles and I'm not used to the courtesy of it. Makes me feel savage, to think I'd stoop low enough to reinvent my own trauma. I…never knew my father," he managed to say, swallowing, "he passed away before I was born. And my mother died giving birth to me. I have no memories of my father at all, and the only memory I have of my mother is fear and pain. The last feelings of her life were the first of mine and I...don't want to sully that with a lie."

This time the silence wasn't disquieting. There was a thoughtfulness to it, and even as Will wished the man would talk, acquit him, clear away his anger, his fear, his need to keep everyone away, the man's silence was ataractic, like a sedative.

"Then allow me to extend the same sentiment," Lecter said sincerely, "I am sorry, Will."

"...Thanks," he said softly, turning over onto his side, putting **her** out of his line of vision, "I mean it."

And then things weren't quite so damning, or awkward, or *itchy*. It all seemed to come together, to coalesce into a truth. One which needed telling.

"I want to give you something."

"I am always open to gifts," Lecter said.

"I'm not used to being exposed. When you already know the thoughts of everyone else in the room, you live with endless ammunition in your pocket. The world becomes easy to read, enough that you begin to hate reading. Sometimes you wish your eyes were blind and your ears were deaf."

And at the other end of the phone was the expectant quiet of listening. He thought he could see that serene face, never showing stress or anger or worry. Lecter had appeared aloof on their first meeting, as if he were looking down at the world from on high; but he had shown interest in him. *What's so special about you Will Graham?* And that condescension had shown itself to be less snobbery and more a calm confidence that created a halcyon sense of conviction, like a man who was living through a dream.

"I told you that it isn't the same with you, and I meant that," Will said, hating that such candour made him jittery.

"How so?" Lecter asked cautiously.

"You make me feel...vulnerable."

"Because I ask you to reveal yourself?"

“Because you don’t make any sense,” Will rebutted, “I can’t see you, your thoughts are closed off, your skin is soft and real but there’s *nothing* when I touch you,” he bit his tongue and wished he could be less fractious and ostentatiously weird, “I can’t see you, Dr. Lecter and I don’t know what that means.”

“And yet you trust me,” the man said, making Will pause, “and that is the gift one cherishes the most.”

Sometimes, when he wasn’t watching, Will thought he might harbour the ability to be surprised. Not a cheap scare, not a sudden action of his nerves. A genuine feeling. He remembered Milly Grey-Pelt, her eyes that saw only the worst. His eyes had recognised her eyes. Her mouth had spoken his truth.

He didn’t need anyone, and so no one needed him.

“Well, this conversation just became worrying.”

“Do I worry you?”

“Only when I can’t see you.”

“Mr. Graham, I do believe you are making advances.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Will couldn’t help but try and laugh it off even as he felt the heat of a flush at his neck, his face, eyes closing, “I wouldn’t even know where to begin flirting with a colleague.”

“Well, I am not much of an authority on the subject myself.”

“Maybe we should just stay professional,” Will said, trying to sound like this was something he was used to, and not something that made his insides shift around uncomfortably.

“Maybe.”

“I should...get some sleep.”

“Of course.”

“I’m sorry if I woke you, before,” Will said awkwardly.

“May I say I am glad that you did?”

“You can say whatever you want.”

“Then I will say goodnight.”

“Right,” Will licked his lips and tried to comprehend just how he’d ended up in this situation; he didn’t get very far, “goodnight Dr. Lecter.”

“Mr. Graham.”

The phone found itself unceremoniously disconnected and dropped against the duvet. Lying on his back, Will Graham brought both of his hands to his face and let out a muffled sound of frustration.

Just like before, Will wished history didn't have a nasty habit of repeating itself. Or that he could be prescient enough to avoid it.

"You fucking stupid, fucking weirdo, fucking repressed, idiot *moron*," he groaned, "why do you keep falling for shrinks?"

Kestrel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The door opened of its own volition, swinging on unseen hinges. As it floated closed Will felt like the room might be tipping, *back and forth, back and forth, a ship on the sea.* He didn't rise so much as fall-to-standing. The air was warm, hot as a sauna. It prickled his skin with sweat. The door opened like a mouth and sound poured forth, drowning him.

The dogs were barking, beyond the salient door, back and forth, back and forth, the sound cutting in and out.

He swam through, forcing himself against the pull. The very room seemed to watch him, as if he were a sport. Gripping him with its intent, holding him close, refusing to let him go.

The barking was squealing was screaming. Every time the door swung closed the room was enveloped with a silence worse than the sound itself, complete and terrifying. It shook his heart, made his limbs ache to move faster.

But the faster he moved, the slower the world became. As the door swung open a note of fear became suspended in the air, the call of a bird of prey high in the clouds, echoing. Swinging closed, *silence,* swinging open, *piercing.*

Abigail! It called. Abigail! The suspended cry became even more permanent, a wail now, a cry, an infant.

The door began to swing faster, faster, *slam creak, slam creak,* as he moved slower, slower. Trying to call out through vocal chords that would not vibrate, strangled to silence, the air thicker and thicker and *thicker* , but his hands so close now, so close, dear *god*...

The door swung wide, gaping, a maw filled with cruel teeth. His eyes widened, his mouth stuck frozen, perpetual, as his world rushed, as if the glue had come unstuck. He was running now, towards the baby's cry, horrified, stricken.

"Will? Will!"

The touch of skin brought him back with the shock of a rebirth. One blink alone separated the nightmare from the reality, but the sudden shift was horrifying to his system, as if he were being torn out from one and stuffed into the other. Tile beneath his feet, his arm outstretched to the nothingness before him, the black sky above, the dogs barking and leaping in circles. Will sucked in a short breath and felt his deadened nerves sear back into life.

He was on the roof of his porch, stuck still as if ready to run from the edge, and behind him Abigail. She had let go of his wrist and was now gripping his long sleeved nightshirt, her eyes amazed, bleary with interrupted sleep.

"Get in. Get *in* right now!" she was saying breathlessly.

“It’s ok,” he wasn’t sure who he was trying to reassure as he turned and carefully clambered back in through the window, “it’s ok.”

“*Ok*?” she said incredulously, hugging herself as Will set foot back in his room, dogs swirling and yapping at his legs, “Are you crazy!?”

“Just sleepwalking,” Will rubbed at his forehead and tried to calm his racing heart, “hasn’t happened in a long time.”

“I heard you screaming my name. Jesus, you could have fucking died!”

“It’s not that high,” Will tried to waive her concern, unsure how successful he was, “and watch your language.”

“Coming from you? That’s rich,” she muttered, sullen.

“I’m not the one who wants to apprentice with the man she’s looking at like she thinks he might be crazy,” Will said flatly, “what time is it?”

“I don’t know,” she threw her hands up in the air, looking around until she saw his bedside alarm clock, “is it really half four in the morning?” she groaned.

“That’s good,” he breathed in deep, closing his eyes, even as the lack of sleep caught up with him, making his mind sag beneath the weight of it, “I would have been waking you in half an hour anyway,” he opened his eyes to look at her, still sullen in the gloom, “I’ll put the water on, then you need to take a bath.”

“Why?”

“No more questions,” he said harshly, making her start.

“But..!”

“No more *questions*,” he said each word as if it were a curse, spitting from his tongue, “don’t you get it? This isn’t some sorority pledge. It’s not a fucking book club. If you want this to work, you will do as I say.”

No room for sentimentality, as she stormed from the room, eyes closed, mouth hard. No room for attachment in the rites. She made her choice, Will tried to convince himself. It didn’t fully sing with the truth. *You let her make her own idea about what this would be, because you are what she accused you*.

“I’m not lonely,” he murmured to himself as she slammed her door, “I don’t have the right to be.”

Dawn. The insipid light seeped in through the cracks in the curtains while the bathwater ran. Sitting on the floor, his arm over the edge as he ran it lazily through the water, Will wondered if she would be able to pass the first test. If she doesn’t, are you going to send her back to her father? he asked himself. Would you abandon her? A long breath in, eyes closed, and a long breath out, eyes open. He knew, deep down, that would never be a viable option. The tumble and burble of running water

hummed alongside the swish as he ran his hand through; *just below body temperature, but not cold enough to slow the senses. A perfect mix.* He knew he could adjust the temperature if necessary.

“Are you sure you want to do this again?” he spoke softly to himself, swallowing, “Calm down, it’s ok, just calm down.”

This had all seemed so simple the night before. Giving in to her whim, giving in to her because she had seen in him what he could not name, or perhaps could not admit to. Her belief that he was good, that he was true and that he could save her. Somehow she had made him believe it too.

“You dressed?” he asked through her door, knocking, “Abigail?”

“I’m not ready.”

From under her doorway light spilled out into the dark corridor. His fingers twitched against the varnished wood, unsure. Licking his lips he opened his mouth and tried to think of the right thing to say. *Scared, upset, estranged to the point of hatred.* Her feelings radiated through like the light under the door, *bright in the dark.* It was odd. He wasn’t used to thinking of others. Normally something he avoided at all costs. Being forced to was unsettling. He knocked again.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” he said uncomfortably, “it’s not important to, well, it’s not necessary. You can just be...”

The click of the latch cut him off, the creak of the door; he backed away as if on instinct. Her eye appeared in the slit, watching him frankly.

“What?” she said, face grim from what he could see of it, “Just pretend? Just spend my life pretending I’m not what I might be?”

“Potential isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Will said seriously; she hesitated long enough for him to continue, “this won’t be easy, and it won’t be pleasant. Most are born into their covens, raised from birth. Children have no impurities to purge.”

“What, cause I’m not a baby I’m soiled somehow?” she asked sarcastically, door opening wider as she leaned against the wall.

“If you want to simplify it, yes,” he said, “you will need to be...reborn through the rite.”

“Is it dangerous?” she asked boldly.

“I’ll keep you safe,” he said, voice strong, unwavering.

“What’s going to happen?”

“I...can’t tell you,” he said slowly, “you have to come to this with eyes unseeing.”

“Blind huh?” she said, her anxiety ratcheting up.

“Faithful,” he corrected as she opened the door fully, standing there in a pair of his shorts and t-shirt.

“If I don’t do this, I’ll never be free of my parents,” she said, a note of pleading in her anger, “I need this. I don’t have a choice.”

“Everyone has a choice,” Will said resolutely.

Never a good way to come to it, Will thought. Desperation. No other way out. This would be tricky, it would make it tricky. Will didn’t like loose ends and spanners in the works. Not when it was his hands that could be caught in the loom, his soul left shredded with regret.

“Take a minute to think about it. Understand the meaning of the word trial. This is a test of endurance as much as it is of faith.”

“Do I need to do it?” she asked, knowing the answer she would get before she even asked, “Can’t we just...not?”

“Ok look, I might not be the best example of the sacred and true-hearted Practitioner, living removed from transgression and only using my magic for good, but even I won’t poison the tree. We never allow the magic to be corrupted. It is sacred. It is pure. It is beyond either of us to question. Now,” he moved backwards, stepping to the bathroom, “take your time. Ok? Take your time and make a decision. You’ll know if it’s right or if it isn’t. Just...trust yourself.”

Back in the bathroom he closed the door and looked down at the two circles he had drawn, picking up the chalk and delineating some of the lines harder, sharper. They overlapped, and in the centre he had drawn The Eye. It watched him as it watched everything, *detached, all seeing*. He cocked his head, thinking he could hear a stir from down the hall. *Nothing*. Will decided to sit, taking his place on the circle furthest from the bath. *Split-second decision, eh? You and your fucking need to save everyone you meet, you stupid hypocrite.* A creak, hesitant but making a choice nonetheless. He lit a candle and sent the dim bathroom flickering, a panoply of penumbra. Footsteps, then feelings filtering through, *doubt, fear, persistence, need*.

She did not knock, and he was glad for it. Showed her intent, showed that she had decided even if she did not know it yet. She flared as a silhouette against the brightness before closing the door behind her. He gestured for her to sit in the second circle, and she did so without question.

“Good,” he said as she crossed her legs and tried her best not to smudge the chalk.

“I have one question I need you to answer before we do...whatever this is,” she said, eyes focused on him intently.

He sighed but nodded, “What?”

“Have you done this before?”

“Once,” he said easily.

“Did it work?”

“You said you had one question,” Will said, feeling her tension rise when she didn’t get the answer she needed; Will ignored it as he pulled on a pair of soft, black gloves, “now give me your hands.”

She did as she was told, holding them out before her. He took them one at a time, inspecting her palms, the lines crossing each, the pads of her fingertips, the length between the proximal, the middle and the distal. He could see her out the corner of his eye, looking unimpressed. *The idea of a palm reading being a trial*. Will wished she wouldn’t be so flippant. He took a steadying breath before removing his gloves, putting them to one side.

“I need you to focus in on yourself,” he said without explanation, “Don’t question the outer influence of the room, of me, of the draught under the door, of the light behind the curtains, the noise of the birds, the feel of the dark, the tickle of the chill on your skin. I just need you to focus inwards, think only of that. Can you do that for me?”

She nodded quickly, though he knew she was confused. There was an elation to it, though, an excitement. Will hoped that would last. The Eye looked up at them both.

“Have you ever told a lie?” he asked; she frowned, looking at him as if she were about to ask a question, “*Answer* me.”

“Yes,” she said, as if surprising herself with her own words.

“Do you love your parents?”

“Yes,” she answered quickly.

“Do you hate the Registry?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a virgin?”

“*Yes*,” she said, looking embarrassed.

“Ok,” he shook his hands, then set about wiping his palms across the backs of his hands, “You can be truthful. That’s good.”

“You didn’t need to ask me that,” she said, radiating *uncomfortable, hurt*.

“Quiet,” he said as gently as he could, placing his left hand behind his back, “both hands, palms up.”

She looked confused when he dropped a curled, dead flower into her right palm, “all I need you to do, Abigail, is be truthful. Allow your truth to be every part of you. Allow that to be your focus in further, that focus in on yourself, you will know that all you see is the truth. Are you ready?”

The nod was all he needed. It was important not to shake, he thought as he hovered his right palm over her left, *almost touching, not quite, not enough to cause a rupture*.

“Focus,” he said as he felt a small heat radiate between their palms, “*concentrate*.”

“I am,” she said sourly.

“*More*,” he ordered, feeling the intensity grow, “focus in, inwards, right down to the places you don’t like to look,” the feeling grew and grew, making Abigail look to their palms in shock, “I said concentrate! All of the things you hate about yourself, that you won’t let yourself see, the moulding corners, the crumbling walls around your hate, your inadequacy, the self loathing, I want you to accept it. All of it.”

And there, in the moment of her doubt, in the moment of her anger and her desperation, she did. He knew, because the flower in her right hand began to uncurl its dried petals, the wrinkles bulging out as the stem firmed, the colour returning, the smell profuse.

“Oh wow,” she breathed, smiling even as waiting tears blinked from her eyes, “that’s amazing! *You’re* amazing!”

“It wasn’t me, not really, we’re just conduits,” Will breathed, removing his hand and gesturing to the flower, “look at it if you want.”

“What do you mean you didn’t?” she said as she turned the carnation around and around, rubbing the soft petals between her thumb and finger.

“What did I say about questions?”

“Sorry,” she said, giving him the flower, looking contrite; they always did, Will thought, once they had seen that the proof of the pudding was in the making; *that it was real because of their inate quality, not because of fairy tales*. It only made it worse, their submission to the wonder of it.

“It means that crazy woman at the market was right,” Will relented, only a little, “you’re proficient,” she let out a chuff of breath, her smile widening, “I wouldn’t put you through this if we couldn’t be sure,” her smile wavered, a frown creeping in, “stand up.”

They stood together. Will refused to let it get to him. Her trust would be as the one he had initiated before; *it would stand up to the test or it wouldn’t* . She needed to trust him, he knew that. He hoped that she did. By now he was sure that she must. The way she had arrived to him should have strengthened it. *A bond, budding.* He was all she had left to rely on.

He helped her climb into the bath. She hissed, ‘*it’s cold* ’ but he ignored her complaints.

“Sit up,” he told her, and she did as told, knees up, arms wrapped around her legs; Will cupped his hands together and scooped the water high, letting it run down over her head.

She gasped but stayed put, blinking as the water caught in her lashes. Her skin was prickled with goose flesh, already pale it looked deathly so as the faint light from the candle set the pallor against the pitch.

“Solutio,” he murmured, dousing her again and again.

Taking his time, Will put on his thin gloves, the water soaking them. When he dipped them into a bowl by his side, filled with dirt from the garden, the soft soil clung to his hands, mixing to a mud. He reached out and put his hands against her upper arms, gripping her tightly as he streaked the earth across her like an impressionist painting.

“Coagulatio,” he said softly as he pulled the dirt through her hair.

The candle flickered as he picked it up, setting the room on edge, scintillating into millions of hidden little dimensions, striking and ephemeral. She took it without question when handed to her, folding her legs down. It shook, betraying her nerves. Even as he curled a lock of her hair around his fingers and pulled it tight as the scissors sheared through, she stayed silent.

“Calcinatio,” Will recited the word precisely as he put the strands into the flame, glowing orange as they singed, curling like fiddleheads, bright as fox tails. The smell was offensive as they watched her hair burn until all that was left were broken pieces falling to the water’s surface.

She stood when he bade her and helped her step out, dripping and chill. Led her to the The Eye, let her stand above it like a supplicant ready to kneel.

It was difficult not to feel the unpleasantness, as he took hold of the hem of her water heavy t-shirt and lifted it up quickly, forcing her arms up. Will kept his eyes to the side but he could feel her shame as she covered her breasts with her hands. When he hooked the fingers of his gloves into her shorts she made to back away, forcing his stare. *Too innocent,* Will thought guiltily, *too innocent to have to go through with this*. His eyes did not leave hers, his penance as her feelings coursed through him. When she nodded, Will carried on. The material stuck to her legs, jerking against her knees. When they reached the ground she stepped out and Will put the sodden clothes aside.

She was as Venus emerging from the ocean. Will wished she could have had the life she wanted, *happy somewhere with people who loved her.* Maybe you can give that to her, he thought. But the feeling was tainted, misshapen. He lifted his right hand as a fist with his index finger extended, circling it round. She understood but looked uncertain, eventually spinning on the spot until her back was to him. Reaching around her he took her hands from their duty, protecting her virtue, and lifted them up, out, until she stood like a crucifixion to her past, an offering to her future.

“Sublimatio,” he said as the dawn light began to filter in through the cracks in the blinds.

Letting go of her didn’t seem to register at first. She stood as she was until he placed the bath robe over her shoulders, as if she had come out of a trance. The ratty white robe was pulled around quickly, covering her gladly from his eyes. When she turned to him he was stripping his gloves, grimacing at the mess of mud and water streaking the fabric.

“Well?” she asked expectantly.

“Well,” he sighed, “that’s the first part. Went well I think. You did well I mean.”

“Wait, first part? What do you mean *first*?” she said with the sharp anger of someone scammed.

“These things come in threes,” Will said, shrugging, “you’ll find that out once this is all over. The trinity has been around for far longer than the Christian faith. This is the first leg of the journey.”

“Well what the heck else is there? What’s next?” she demanded.

“The first is offering, cleansing. The second is...faith, acceptance. No one knows what the second trial will be. It could be anything.”

“So I’m going to be, what? Asked to walk over hot coals?” she scoffed, looking at him like he was the shyster everyone always assumed of those who Practiced, “Take a leap of faith off of a cliff? Maybe you’re just a perv who likes feeling up young girls.”

“For crying out loud,” Will shook his head, smiling incredulously, “don’t be so full of yourself, sweetheart. Or so demeaning of me.”

“Well,” she huffed, looking at her nails, “how would I know? I don’t know you. You won’t even say what’s going to happen to me.”

“Like I said,” Will reiterated strongly, making her roll her eyes, “it can be literally anything. Don’t

you understand Abigail? I didn't start this," her displeasure began to shift to worry as he continued, "the trial began the moment you left your parents house to seek me out. It's impossible to stop it now. You made your choice. You have been heard. Now, have a shower. I'm going to make breakfast. Then I have to go to work."

He had expected it to take longer. For an odd little period of time he wondered if he might never see her again, *out the window, run to the road, flag down a car, escape the frying pan into fire situation she had found herself in.* When he heard her footsteps on the stairs he glanced at the wall clock. *Seven forty eight* . The oven hummed merrily, breathing out sweet, warm air as he opened it and fed in three new pancakes onto the warm plate. It complimented the meaty aroma of the sausages in the other pan. For a worrying moment, as Abigail stood staring at him from the doorway, wrapped in the heavy blanket from the cot bed he'd made up for her days ago, Will realised he didn't know what to say.

"Not a vegetarian, are you?" he asked as he turned the sausages over.

"No," she said, surly, "I'm not a vegetarian. I'm not normal. I'm not a whore. I'm not a liar."

"Abigail, please," Will sighed.

"What, I thought we were supposed to be truthful?" she said facetiously.

"I know you have questions. The important part is understanding that not everyone has the answers."

"Sounds like a cop-out to me."

"And that's ok," he said as he walked to a cupboard, fetching plates; he made her up a stack of pancakes and four sausages, plonking a jug of maple syrup, a bottle of ketchup and a glass of orange juice next to her, "this is a transitional phase. You're leaving one life, and entering another. Answers will come, we just need to figure out what the questions are."

"Oh, I'm allowed to have them now am I?" she asked dourly.

"Rites are prescriptive," he explained, making himself an identical plate, "maybe you'll perform one some day, and you'll need to know the laws that govern everything."

"I hate you," she said as she jammed her fork into a sausage and bit the end off, chewing, " I hate you and I hate my parents and I *hate* your stupid religious dogma."

"That doesn't matter," Will tried to believe it as he doused his pancakes in syrup, "you'll know that soon enough. I'm your Elder. We're not made to be liked. I'm an advisor. I'll teach you everything you need to know, understand that. I'm not here to be liked by you, I'm here to make you into what you can be," she was watching him from beneath her half-dried straggly hair as if she thought that maybe she could leave with no regrets, "put some syrup on your pancakes. It's good for the shock."

"I don't like it."

“Everyone likes maple syrup,” Will said, brow raised, smiling.

“I don’t.”

“Ok,” Will nodded, wiping his hands on a piece of kitchen towel, “how about honey?”

When she nodded Will tried to tell himself that he knew she wouldn’t leave. His intuition never steered him wrong, *except when it came to friendship, to family, to love* . As she slathered the honey on her pancakes and devoured them one by one, Will breathed in the scent of attachment and let it sink down into his lungs. He knew it was wrong, always was, but it had never stopped him. Only burned him, charred itself into his flesh, as an indelible testament to his foolishness.

The road was blessedly free of traffic. As he looked to the other side of the highway, at the traffic jam forming, he was glad that at least he wasn’t headed that way today. He called the familiar number and put it on speaker phone.

“Crawford,” Jack answered succinctly.

“Any luck with the search?” Will asked as he turned out onto the off ramp.

“Jimmy has most of it down, but I don’t think that’s going to help. He brought in some of his research team this morning. They’ve been working since seven.”

“What do you mean not going to help?” Will asked, frowning; the anxiety of the date was nipping at him, biting at his calm. *One more day until the parade of corpses continued.* The wait.

“I mean that no matter how much they try and figure it out, it’s not going to help us know where the next one will be. We still don’t have enough of an idea of victimology, it’s too random.”

“We have to put out a warning,” Will said, hating the sigh he was given in return, “come on Jack. If you’re going to admit we’re deaf and blind, the least we can do is not be dumb. The *least* we can do is warn the poor fuckers.”

“Registry will never agree to an announcement,” Jack said, placating.

Will sneered and let out a sound of disgust, “And what has the safety of unnaturals got to do with them, huh? I thought law enforcement was supposed to be for the people?”

“If we out these murders as being coordinated purely at halfbreeds, you *know* the chaos that will set in motion. It’ll stoke the fires. Bad enough that violence rates and vigilantism are up.”

“Piss off,” Will said facetiously, “like you give a shit if an unnatural gets zipped open and emptied out like a kid’s pencil case.”

“It’s just a prediction, Will, you’re prediction. It's not set in stone, we don’t even know if it will happen!”

“Oh come on!”

At the other end came a string of muttering he couldn't understand, and then when Jack decided to be legible it was enraging, "It's the one ace we have, I'm not playing it."

"Fuck you Jack, this isn't poker! Someone in this city is going to die tomorrow," Will bit out; when he didn't receive a reply Will took a deep breath, trying to rationalise his thinking. Getting angry isn't going to help, he tried to tell himself, but it really makes me feel fucking better.

He tried to think of Abigail, her clever eyes intent on her future, the hate and the resentment being slowly but surely overwritten by awe and belief in herself. Her ability to move through the reeds in the bog and find her way to dry land, even in the light of renewal and trauma. It helped him centre himself, even if the ire remained, "I'm going out to the Klingerts."

"You mean Eve Klingert? *No,* absolutely not!"

"I need to know if the murders from before have the seal, Jack. When I worked with Lass we didn't even know the seals existed."

"What good is that going to do us?" Jack asked, demeaning, "Get you and, by association, *me* onto the local cop shit list? If any one of them puts in a complaint I'm going to have shit spewed all over me, from multiple directions at once, and I want to go on record as saying I would be blaming *you* for it one hundred percent!"

"We need to know if it's the same people Jack, really the same, be goddamn sure," Will explained testily, clicking on the indicator and waiting at the crossing, "if the people that perpetrated the murders from the last case, christ, why are you even asking? It's not rocket science! If they're the same then we can maybe narrow down the search, see if there are any correlations, predict *something*. Make an assessment! Juggle some ideas! Shit on a fucking stick Jack I can't just sit by and watch this happen! I need to *do* something!"

As he shook his steering wheel a slick, silver BMW cut him off. Will slammed on the brakes, rolled down his window and shouted, *"Learn how to drive you over-privileged, shit-for-brains cunt!"* before returning calmly to his call.

"I'm going to the Klingerts, and then I am going to the Lewis house, and I will carry on from there until I am done," he said clearly, "just like we all will be if the Inspector General's office ever gets wind of how royally you are fucking this investigation right up its tight ass."

And then he hung up, because he really didn't want to deal with the shit storm he had just created in a moment of utter, blissful recklessness. Biting at the inside of his mouth as the road rolled along beneath his tires, Will cycled through to Katz's name. It took two goes to get her, which made Will give up on her help before he'd tried.

"Jack told you already huh?"

"Hi Will," she greeted him civilly, making him tut.

"I was going to ask you to come out to the previous sites, but I'm guessing I've been vetoed."

"Jack needs me here, I'm working the make-up of your seal. We took a sample from a couple of the

sites."

"Any good news?" Will asked, hoping.

"Not really. Just the usual. Sulphur, traces of iron, ammonia, phosphorus. I think they burned it into the plaster layer like lighting a fuse, somehow, but containing it from causing further damage to the surroundings."

"What about Zeller? Any correlation between the victims regarding work done in their home, visitors?"

"Zippo. They weren't even in the ballpark of each other so local leaflets were different. Only thing they had through their letter boxes that we know of that were the same were mass marketing from big brands like mobile phone or cable providers. And from their bank records we know none of them took any of the offers. A couple of them had work done, but one was a boiler replacement and the other was an infestation of cockroaches. They called an exterminator. We're tracking down the workmen who went on site now."

"Yeah, ok," Will knew it wouldn't lead anywhere, "sounds good."

"You don't."

"I'm aware."

"Jack told me, about your previous site visit plan. Thought they were off limits?"

"They are," Will said tightly.

"Well, aren't you going to have to talk your way in then?" she didn't seem to be able to keep the patronising from her tone.

"Think I'm going to make this worse before it gets better?" Will asked acidly.

"I think you should maybe ask your new friend to tag along," she suggested casually, "he has a nice, neutral vibe to him."

"Calling me a caustic bastard?" Will asked bluntly.

"You complement each other," she replied diplomatically, "and you sound like you need someone with you right now."

"Yeah, maybe," Will drummed on his steering wheel and sighed, "I have to go."

"Me too," she said before hanging up.

Part of him wished she hadn't brought it up. Now all he could think about was the man he was trying his best to ignore. Only he couldn't ignore the truth in Beverly's words. If this was going to work then he needed someone to slick his way in. This time he felt better that he was answered after three rings. He wouldn't have put it past Jack to call Lecter as a proviso to Will's own blow up.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” came the smooth voice over the speaker; it seemed to fill the cab.

“Hey,” Will blanked, “uh, no pleasure today I’m afraid. Where are you?”

A moment’s hesitation, then, “I am at my office.”

“Good. I’m coming to pick you up. I need your help.”

“I am not exactly available at the moment,” Lecter said, conciliatory, “I have a client this morning, and then another...”

“Then reschedule,” Will interrupted agitatedly, realising he was being exactly what Beverly had described and tagging on, “please. There isn’t any time, we’re running on a scrappy fucking hour glass here. I really need you with me on this.”

“I am very sorry, Will,” Lecter said, voice marginally tighter, “but I cannot drop my patient’s interest for a sojourn to...”

“Oh, well what use are you!” Will shouted angrily before hanging up.

“Well, he sounds delightful.”

Hannibal couldn’t help but feel the twitch at his upper lip as he replaced the receiver and turned in his chair, the leather creaking softly. Behind him Bedelia Du Maurier was flipping through an issue of some trite magazine one of his clients had left in his waiting room, her high heels clicking against the wood.

“I do wish you wouldn’t eavesdrop, Bedelia,” he said airily, “it is most uncouth.”

“Well, since you won’t tell me about him I have to listen in whenever I get the chance,” she said, flicking to another page and circling around his desk to sit languidly in his favourite chair; Hannibal stayed quiet, contemplative, “aren’t you going to call him back?” she asked.

“No need,” Hannibal said, cocking his head.

“You don’t even have any clients today,” she said smugly, “playing hard to get?”

“Some first class psychoanalyses you picked up in your latest issue?” Lecter taunted.

She watched him critically, then shook her head and looked away. He had to admit the more she acted self-assured, the more he enjoyed the farce. When the shrill ring of the phone echoed in his office Lecter couldn’t help but look to her with an air of victory. She seemed to be stoutly ignoring him, but he knew her too well to believe it.

“Back so soon?” he answered the phone stiffly, goading.

“Look, I’m sorry, alright?” Will’s voice was taught, like a hangman’s noose, “Fucking said I was

sick fed up of apologising, but you have me at it again. I didn't mean to take this out on you, but you're making it very difficult not to."

"Oh?" Lecter couldn't help but smile that Will's apology had dissolved almost immediately into an insult.

"You're very unlikeable when you're bureaucratic."

"And you are most unlikeable when you are being your own patsy. I'd rather you were angry than servile."

"Go fuck yourself," Will said without venom, "happy?"

"Marginally," Hannibal replied, looking unimpressed.

"Then don't ask for what you think you want. I am sorry, you're just going to have to deal with that. I take my anger out on people I like when I'm particularly pissed off."

"Then I will take it as a compliment?" Lecter said, enjoying the shift and pull of the man's taciturnity.

"You should," a pause, and then, "don't make me beg you for this. I'm running out of charm."

"I'm beginning to think that might be impossible," Lecter said, ignoring Bedelia rolling her eyes, "I can reschedule my clients."

"You can?" Will sounded surprised, clearing his throat.

"I can. Should I expect you shortly?"

"I'll be there...fifteen minutes or so."

"Until then," Lecter replaced the receiver and steepled his fingers.

The air in the room seemed to vibrate with the anticipation of another meeting. The particles of his deepest, smallest existence were resonating as they had done that first moment in Jack Crawford's stuffy little office. The teacup had come back together, reformed, transmuted into something he would never have imagined. The physical and the ephemeral worlds colliding, wings of chance beating a hurricane of the future.

"You are so screwed," her taunt snatched him from his reverie; he watched her laugh demurely with hard eyes, "if he ever finds out what you..."

"But he will not," Lecter interrupted, standing in order to walk to the chair; standing by her knees he placed a hand gently against the back of the chair, by her neck, "and if he does I'll know who to blame, won't I darling?"

He knew she was trembling, could feel it through the leather, see it in the waver of her magazine. She put it down into her lap and stared at him defiantly.

“I suppose you want me to go before he gets here?”

“That would be best,” Hannibal agreed.

“God, this is as bad as when you started inviting Chilton to dinner,” she scoffed to show bravado, standing up and running her hand through her well coiffed hair, “you know he hasn’t stopped gushing to me about it for weeks?”

“I didn’t realise you two were so close,” Hannibal said observantly.

“Wouldn’t call it close. I would call you though,” she said, purposefully dropping her magazine on his desk as she walked past, making him sigh shortly, “close.”

“Will is my friend,” he said succinctly.

“And here I thought he’d just fall into the black hole with the rest of us,” she slid into a heavy woollen coat and purposefully kept her back to him; Hannibal appreciated the bravery of the act, “the light of friendship bends around you Hannibal, never quite reaching the core.”

“Enjoying your time stuck on the event horizon, are we?” he asked, smiling.

“I’m your psychiatrist Hannibal,” she said languidly, with a hint of aspic, “you are not mine.”

He walked her to the door, much as he had for the duration of their acquaintance. *Always walking her to the door, but allowing her to open it herself*. No use in the study if the players knew they were in a play, after all. This time, she was half way *exit stage left* when she turned back for one more round of applause.

“You won’t reconsider, will you,” she said suddenly; he couldn’t quite tell from her eyes: disappointed or afraid? Upset perhaps? He wasn’t sure if he cared in the end.

“I don’t believe I can,” he said, “considering I never considered in the first place.”

Watching her leave, a green snake in the grass. Camouflaged by simplicity, unmasked by savagery. He still stood by his choice in her. Even if he detested the very fibres of her being he could not truly blame her, not any more. She was an animal of survival. After so long alone she had been the engine that drove him forwards, forwards, always forwards. He would always have to give her that.

Watching from the window as her car pulled out, Hannibal wondered how the world would have looked without her in it. As Will Graham’s offensively Yankee truck pulled into his driveway he knew just how different and bereft it would have been.

“Il faut souffrir pour être belle,” he muttered softly, smiling as he let the curtain fall.

It was so very different, and yet the outcome was similar enough to make him check his peripheral like a nervous rabbit fearing the fox’s teeth. It had been a long time since he’d felt like trusting someone, and he felt the irony that he had picked a man with self confessed trust issues. Still, Will thought as he squeezed himself into the cramped boiler room at the previous residence of Kay

Lewis, the third victim in the Chesapeake Ripper case of two years prior, it could be worse.

“Could have been stuck with Zeller,” he breathed out as he crammed his face against the wall and reached his fingertips in behind the boiler itself, feeling them tingle.

The flashlight revealed just what he had expected to find, *the edges of the seal he knew the rest of almost by heart now, skulking out of sight like a fat spider*. Just as it had been on the underside of the sink in the Kingerts. Just as he was sure it would be somewhere just as clandestine at the Llewellyn household, if they could get access.

And there he had to give begrudging credit to the man Beverly had sold to him. Will knew he was as palatable as a lemon stuck with razor blades, but Lecter made him look like a drooling, dribbling lepper in comparison to his well tailored charm. Talking with the residents about past murders, gaining Will entry to their homes to perform magic in order to find a hidden, latent spell in their own residences? Lecter might as well have asked them if they’d have liked some free chocolates and an all expenses paid trip to Disneyland. He didn’t mean to look so amazed, but it had been mesmerising, watching the man work, and confusing seeing the outcome.

Not that he had squandered his chance. Lecter had been the key, and Will had been the hammer. They were two for two so far, *two inactive seals at two previous murder sites.* It meant something, Will was sure it meant something, had to give him insight into the workings somehow, he was just unsure yet what that was. The clock seemed to glare at him angrily from the dashboard, mocking his inability like a bully laughing at a cat drowning in a sinking bag.

“How’d you do that?” Will asked bluntly as he drove them towards the Llewellyns; the sun was heading towards evening and Will hated how the beautiful orange glow against the trees mocked him.

“That?” Lecter asked as he fiddled with the radio; Will gave him a sidelong glance and a shake of the head as classical music swam from the speakers. He wanted to say something about stereotypes but managed to hold his tongue.

“You have a silver tongue, doctor,” Will said.

“Perhaps only in comparison to your forked one.”

“Look, I can admit I don’t make friends easily, but you got me into the houses of complete strangers to do some pretty shady rituals and they looked like I was doing *them* a favour.”

“Accusing me of witchcraft?” Lecter was smiling; Will noticed he’d been doing a lot of that lately.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Will said witheringly, “anyway, I suppose I shouldn’t be asking you the obvious questions, because you’ll just twist the answers back on me.”

Lecter didn’t rise to the bait this time, and Will smiled wryly, shaking his head. It was...nice. He could admit that. It was nice to have this, whatever it was.

“You think we are missing something,” Lecter said as they passed an industrial park, most of the cars ahead turning in to trail the parking lot for spaces, “but I would say it is more prudent to look at what we have, and not what we don’t.”

“Agreed,” Will nodded, checking his GPS, “whoever did this, it was coordinated and it was methodical. They wanted to learn something about these people before they murdered them, I mean why else would you hide a seal so expertly? And like Price said the rune of activation, it’s the one thing we can understand from the make-up of that ritual. Why else would you put a trigger pin in a trap if you aren’t waiting to see what sets it off?”

“But every seal you have sniffed out so far has been a proverbial dud,” Lecter noted unhelpfully, “all with snares intact.”

“Then I’m missing something, or *we’re* missing something aren’t we, really. Don’t see why I should exclude you when you’re so eager to be involved.”

“You know I think I’m going to train myself to enjoy your little apologies,” Lecter said with a smug charm that Will wished he could hate, “they are going to be many and often.”

“Get used to disappointm…”

It was sudden: *smack* , *squeeze! Like a fist around his heart.* The brakes applied as a bi-product of the shock, his foot jerking, the wheel twisted, the truck squealing to the side and lunging out onto the other side of the road like an alligator after a deer. His eyes fogged and he couldn’t speak, couldn’t think anything but…

Screaming, she was screaming for him. Hands everywhere, hands and chains and pulling and screaming!

The touch brought him back from the edge of falling. Will sucked in a staggering breath, eyes blinking, wide, fingers tight around the wheel, the sounds of horns blaring and people shouting angrily. He was shaking, he could feel it but barely understand it. Managing to look to his left he found Lecter, concerned but stalwart as always in the face of Will’s outer madness.

“Will, I need you to let go of the wheel,” Lecter was saying, one hand on his shoulder, the other over his left hand, “can you do that for me?”

“Oh fuck,” Will managed out, choking, “shit, *shit!*”

“You appear to having another episode, Will, can you hear my voice?”

“Get out,” Will snapped, eyes wild, “get out of my fucking truck, now!”

“I am afraid I cannot comply with your request,” Lecter said with unbearable rationality in the face of the unexplainable, “I am responsible for you.”

“Get out, just *get out!”* Will found himself screaming at the man who, in response…*touched his face and looked into his eyes.*

“I am right here,” were the four words Will would remember later that night.

“Jesus *christ*,” Will whimpered as the feeling of dread began to crawl across his skin, gritting his teeth and unable to do anything more than put his foot back on the gas, pulling out violently around the man who was walking towards them from the car he had nearly hit, now leaping back and cursing at them, gesturing wildly.

No time for him, no time for anyone, no time for red lights, not time for the silent man in the passenger seat. *Someone had her! Someone was hurting her!* Will floored it, the journey a haze of honking horns and squealing tires. The next thing he was aware of, they were half way down his driveway and he was unbuckling his seatbelt so he could leap from the car like a wild animal escaping a cage.

"Stay in the fucking car!" Will ordered frantically to Lecter before rushing towards the pull of the spell.

She was here, she was close, he knew she was, he could feel the Ravenheart calling to him, cawing harshly like an alarm in an echo chamber, resonant, terrified.

He ran, because it was all he could do to stem the rising tide of fear, *not all his, some hers, mostly hers*. The forest called to him like a siren, beckoning him into its embrace. Branches caught in his hair, scratched at his face, roots tripped him, making him scramble up, hands covered in dirt. *Heart racing, eyes searching frantically.* And then there, on the ground caught in the roots of a massive tree, was the charm he had given her, the ravenheart pulsing and pulling at his mind where she must have dropped it.

"Abigail!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting again, "*Abigail!"*

Nothing but the airy hush of the forest, blanketed by the breeze rustling the leaves. His hands left his face, travelling to his hair, gripping the curls until they pulled painfully. All around him the trees were afire with the dying light of the sun, *all shadows, all darkness.* Soon tracking would be impossible.

You're going to lose her too? He screamed at himself. *You're going to lose her!*

"Tell me where you are," he pleaded, words barely discernable chest clenching tightly, painfully, "please tell me where you *are*."

Crack. There. *A whimper, a yelp*. There! Will sprang forwards, running through a clump of ferns, over a fallen tree, thick with moss and large, flat mushrooms. The ground flew beneath his feet, his ears open to all sounds, *birds tweeting in alarm, small animals scuttling in his wake, the sounds of feet, the whines of pain*. He followed it like the shark follows the drop of blood from a quarter mile, honing in, ignoring the pain from the scratches, the ache in his chest as he drew in lungful after lungful of freezing air.

And then there, *there it was*. A flicker of colour, bright and sharp. The movement of gold. The swish of a tail. Will didn't stop running until he reached it. It was the last thing he would have expected to see, if he hadn't already known it would be there. Golden fur, tail between her legs, ears back.

"Abigail," he breathed out with the relief of the parent finding the lost child who had slipped their care; rushing in he dropped to his knees as she whined, barking, and struggled to undo the chain around her neck binding her to the large oak. It came away with a *snick* and she wrestled her head back and out of the loop, "It's ok, I promise, I'll…"

The blow he should have seen coming was worse than he had expected, *a solid boot straight to the ribs* . It stole his breath and sent him tumbling to the ground, clutching his chest in agony. Wheezing, Will's vision blurred, mixing the reds with the blacks with the golds. He rolled over onto his side and tried to stand. Abigail was yapping over and over, a squealing bark that spoke of a scream to stop. He managed to grab a handful of earth and organic detritus, muttering a quick incantation. As his attacker closed in on him Will threw it up into the man's face, making him curse and yell in pain as the soil sizzled and hissed against his skin.

Another heavy, sinking blow against his flank. The pain flared like a spike of hot iron. He couldn't control the yell as he tried desperately to crawl across the forest floor, find something, anything. Then a pair of hands grabbed at his jacket, pulling him back through the pine needles and the frozen dirt, curling up under his nails, leaving runnels in the undergrowth.

"Thought you could take my daughter from me?" a familiar voice spoke next to his ear as Will felt himself hauled up, his muscles shrieking in pain, "Try to trick her, fool her, use her for your own ends? " Will tried to grab at a heavy, dead branch near his right leg but the man behind him hurried round and kicked it away.

Two of them, Will thought as Garret Jacob Hobbs stood before him, grinning, and whoever he had brought with him now held Will from behind. The punch came from nowhere, square against his cheek, Hobbs face a panoply of righteous anger. It send his mind flying.

So many dead, so many at his hands, so many more to come. Will couldn't see the man's mind, not truly, he was a person behind a veil, working though a magic blacker than he could ever imagine. When the hands behind him let go with a gasp Will fell against the ground, looking up at the canopy, dazed.

"Oh my god, stop, please *stop* ! Lets just go," a woman there, short blond hair curling up as she looked on, horrified, "come on Abigail, honey," she said tremulously, hands outstretched towards the terrified dog.

"We can't leave him here," Garrett spoke loud enough to almost shout, his frenzy building, "You know what will happen if he lives. I am going to end this now, before it..!"

Will braced himself as best he could for the next attack. Only the sound of pain didn't come from his mouth; it extended out, elongated by confusion, he couldn't understand where it had come from. The woman was shouting, terrified, and as he managed to roll over he saw it.

Abigail's canine teeth sunk into her father's leg, deep enough to draw blood out onto his khaki trousers. The man was grinding out a cry through gritted teeth, jaw clenched tight. When he reached down to grab the dog by the scruff of its neck and shake her Will thought he could see the betrayal coursing through them both.

"Garrett *don't* !" the woman cried out, hysterical.

"You dare turn against your family!" Hobbs was screaming as he smacked the dog in the face.

One moment there was a terrified golden mutt, and the next there was a weeping, naked teenager falling against the dirt, her mouth full of blood, teeth thick with it. When the gunshot came Will thought it might have been for him. If he'd been compos mentis enough he might have tried to search his body for the entry wound. Instead he was left bereft, confused as all of the players on the

sordid stage stopped stock still, staring at something behind him.

“I believe whatever you are planning would be very unwise.”

He had never been more glad to hear Lecter’s voice, despite being partly livid that the man had disobeyed his order to stay put.

“Why don’t you stay the fuck out of our business,” Hobbs was saying through the pain, “this isn’t a show!”

“Oh honey, it’s going to be ok,” the woman was crouching down over Abigail; *her mother*, was all Will could think as Abigail began to cry, sobbing furiously, clutching at the woman like a lifeline.

“Will, are you alright?” Lecter asked; Will could hear him approaching, twigs snapping beneath his well shined shoes.

“I’m ok,” he wheezed, coughing roughly as he struggled up, clutching at the nearest tree to stay upright; Lecter stopped next to him, his arm raised, gun pointed, “put that down, for christ’s sake. Just put it down.”

He wouldn’t lie and say he wasn't surprised when Lecter obeyed without question. There was a predatory glint in his eye that gave Will pause, *the look of a hunter finally spying its prey through the thicket.* Garrett Hobbs frowned, wary as if sure this was a trap of some kind. The scene before him was a sensory abattoir, feelings and thoughts and images glaring brighter than the sun, loud and insufferable. Will closed his eyes and leaned heavily, the bark biting at his palm.

It was a waiting game, but only two of them were playing. Lecter stayed put, like an immovable wall, eyes narrowed. Hobbs was staring at his leg, and beyond it the girl who had caused the trauma. Abigail and her mother, twined together like a vine meeting a vine, grasping each other tight enough to smother what little was left of their love.

“I’m sorry, mama,” Abigail managed to get out through her tears, “I am. I am.”

“It’s ok, pup,” Louise Hobbs said as if she thought it could be true as long as she spoke it aloud, “It’s ok, I promise.”

“We’re getting out of here,” Hobbs seethed, “come on, let’s go.”

He hobbled to his wife, grabbing her arm and hauling her up. Abigail let go of her mother as she stood, making the woman’s eyes widen in shock. Garrett turned back, looking to her as if he thought she were mad.

“*Abigail*,” the man said, his quiet belying his anger, “get up, we’re going home.”

“No daddy,” she said, arms wrapped around her chest, “I can’t. I won’t. I’m staying.”

“You ungrateful...” he breathed, taking a threatening step.

This time Will didn’t protest as Lecter raised the pistol, hand steady as he aimed, tutting as Hobbs stared at him, teeth bared.

“It is most impolite to force a lady’s choice,” the man said calmly.

“You’re my kin, Abigail, you do as you are *told*,” Hobbs bit out.

“I’m not yours any more,” she said, voice wobbling.

“Abigail please,” Louise said with a sob.

“I can’t mama, I can’t. I won’t be your pawn any longer, neither of you. I want you to go.”

“*Please*..!” her mother pleaded.

“Get up..!” her father demanded.

“No!” she shouted in reply; the silence was deafening, “*no*. I want you both to leave, and don’t come for me again. Not *ever* again.”

The pain was palpable, enough that Will could no longer tell whose it was. Louise wept as she turned her back on her daughter. Garrett looked as if he might risk the bullet to reach her, but Lecter’s aim was unwavering. Instead he stared at her with contempt, leaning over to spit on the ground between them as if it were a physical accumulation of everything he wished he could say. Abigail flinched, shaking as her father turned, putting his arm around his wife’s shoulders. They walked into the forest, shambling over the messy forest floor like a pair of broken marionettes.

The gun was lowered unceremoniously and Lecter handed it to Will who took it gingerly.

“Apologies, I found it in your glove box.”

“I’m not going to level any blame, it was a good call,” Will said as Lecter shuffled out of his heavy overcoat and walked to the girl, still on the ground, curled in on herself.

“You must be cold,” Lecter said kindly, even as Abigail eyed him with suspicion, all flighty jerks and twitches.

“It’s ok, Abigail, he’s a friend,” Will said, nodding as best he could.

The coat drowned her, like a little girl playing dress up, but at least she looked less tense. More in control despite her red rimmed eyes and hollow stare. She walked to Will, staring at her feet. He tried to keep away from her thoughts. For a moment, a strange pause, he thought she was going to beat him, hit him, scratch and tear at him. *Would you stop her if she did?* He asked himself. He already knew the answer to that question.

“Can you take me home?” she asked with a surprising cogency.

“Sure,” Will nodded; when she leaned in against him Will reached up to run his hand down her hair on impulse.

Regret and acceptance, warring with each other like rabid dogs, all fur and teeth. The world tilted, then swayed, and there was an arm around his back before Will realised he couldn’t stand. He thought he could smell cologne.

“We should get you both somewhere warm,” Lecter held him close.

“Your dad has a mean right hook,” Will tried to play it off, but would later realise that a minor concussion didn’t lend itself to comedy.

It was odd, at first. Will had never been the sort to submit control to another, but it had been necessary. On their return he had found the dogs barking up a storm in the kitchen, the doors and cupboards significantly scratched and clawed. Abigail had been silent since the attack, and on setting foot in the house she ran upstairs and closed her door tight shut behind her. As if the house were his, Lecter had helped Will to the couch and set about sitting him, then manoeuvring him to lie down, *legs up, a cushion beneath his head.* He would have resented it, if he’d been able to. The barrage of questions hadn’t helped.

“Do you feel dizzy? Numb? Can you tell me the date, Will?” Lecter had annoyed him to the point of pretending to be asleep, which hadn’t worked because the man assumed he was suffering from severe head trauma. On being shaken awake and a bright light shined into his right retina, Will had bit out a foul curse that had even Lecter raising a brow.

“I am *fine*,” Will said after a long, deep breath, “my ribs hurt, my back hurts and my face feels like someone is slowly pumping up a balloon, but I’m not going to die, ok? Could you just get me...peas, freezer, please? And…”

Lecter paused as Will ran out of words, mouth left hanging open until he shut it tightly. They stayed that way until Will found the strength to broach the question that was now sending up flares in his mind.

“About Abigail...” he tried to start.

“She is a shifter, I am aware Will.”

“I know you know, I was there,” Will gritted out tersely, “but she’s my, look, she’s my ward, ok? I’m responsible for her. She’s staying with me, and I’m going to look after her until she’s ready to go out on her own. I don’t want to hear any phone calls to social services from the next room, ok?” When he looked up Lecter was watching him silently, as if he were a particularly wondrous butterfly on a leaf that he did not want to disturb for fear of frightening it away. Will scowled.

“I said ok?”

“Understood,” Lecter nodded; it was all the reply he was afforded.

He had been left, rather disgruntled, in the company of lapping tongues and jumping paws. The dogs had never been respecters of other people’s personal space. Buster, ever the worry wart, had leapt up onto his legs and wandered up to settle on his abdomen, lying down and growling at the others when they became too rowdy. Will had managed a smile, stroking the small dog’s rough fur, before falling into a doze. By the time he woke up decisions had been made that he wished he’d been part of.

“Your house? Are you nuts? I am staying right here, *we* are staying right here,” Will tried to sound as uncompromising as possible while he sat at his dining room table with Abigail on his left, hot

chocolate in her hands and eyes down, and Lecter standing at the head of the table looking at Will as if he should really try and be a bit more grateful.

“You are not safe here,” Lecter stated fairly.

“I *am* safe. I know this area, there’s magic here that can’t be replicated anywhere else. Abigail explained how her father connived her out of this house, the dogs tried to protect her, he threatened them, she went with him. It was *nothing* to do with this house being unsafe!”

“Then perhaps this house being a place that everyone who wants you dead or kidnapped knows you will be, precisely, is its intrinsic flaw,” Lecter rebutted, unimpressed.

“And what am I supposed to do, huh? Just up and run at the first sign of trouble?”

“I believe this is the *third* sign of trouble.”

“Fucking semantics,” Will ground out, “I have responsibilities! What about my pack?”

“Alana has offered to watch them.”

“Of course she has, she’s Alana, she can’t say no to anyone!”

“He’s right.”

Two words that cut the strings, leaving him dangling. Will looked to Abigail with the circumspection of a man at a funeral. That he found her staring back at him was disconcerting, but he bore it.

“I don’t want to stay here either,” she said, before taking a drink.

“Sweetheart, I understand this has been a rough week...”

“Please don’t patronise me,” she said stonily; she took a drink of hot chocolate and that was the last he could get from her for a while. She just sat there and drank her drink, and Will felt that he had been overruled by compassion before logic got a look in .

Which was how he found himself sitting on the gloomy porch, a couple of duffel bags at his feet, watching Alana pull up with her trailer in tow. When her headlights dimmed the world seemed to turn off.

“You know I’m going to have to start charging you by the hour,” she was saying with forced humour, until she was close enough to see him in the light from the living room; she stopped, frowning with worry, “oh my god.”

“If you’re going to chew me out, get in line,” Will couldn’t help but sound defeated.

“Does Jack know?” she asked, folding her arms as if to stop herself from trying to reach out and touch him.

“Probably,” Will shrugged, making her frown, “if you want to know the plan then speak to the tyrant. I don’t get to make any choices any more.”

“What are you talking about?”

The door creaked as it opened. *A fairytale, he thought, sneaking out from the pages.* Will wasn’t sure, as he sat back into his chair and watched them talk, if he was the only one who saw it. Had barely noticed it himself until he’d really started looking at the man, taken an interest. The strange thing, still out of focus, still unclear, but there, somewhere, beneath the skin. To others he must look so normal, Will thought.

“Vigilante violence against unnaturals is hardly new,” Lecter was saying, “but Will hasn’t exactly kept himself out of the public eye. The media have seen to that.”

They had both agreed on the cover story, and it seemed to be working. Will hadn’t decided yet whether Lecter’s easy bending and breaking of rules was something he should be wary of or lucky to find.

“That fucking woman,” Alana was saying tiredly, “the Tattler has never had any moral code but since Lounds took over, well,” she looked at Will and lifted a conciliatory but useless hand, “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault,” he shrugged.

“Don’t start this,” she said, rubbing at her face, “ok? Please.”

“Ok,” Will sniffed, “I’ll shut up.”

“I’m not doing this,” Alana said categorically, “I’ll take the dogs, it’s fine. Just let’s not do this.”

The need to snap back was fierce, but he managed to avoid it. No need to bite the hand that fed, after all. He felt guilty enough as it was. Will helped coral the dogs into the trailer. Lenny refused to jump up with the others, lying down on the ground with his face between his paws.

“Come on bud,” Will stroked the dog’s head, fingers lifting up his silky ears, “it’ll only be for a little while, I promise.”

He received an annoyed grunt in response. Will sympathised. He watched as his life was bundled into the back of Alana’s trailer, dogs and food and bowls and beds, looked in through the window as plugs were pulled from sockets, food from the fridge, doors and windows locked. It was ominous. He didn’t like it.

“You’d tell me, wouldn’t you?” he turned on hearing her voice to find Alana double checking the trailer hitch; Will paused cautiously. When she looked up at him her eyes were dark as the night around them, “If you were worried? Because I’m worried.”

“I can’t tell you not to be,” Will sighed, hands in his pockets.

“That a yes?” she asked, trying for levity.

It was difficult not to fall back into the easy comfort. *Wishing he could lean in and hold her, feel her warm and solid in his arms.* Sometimes he wondered if he’d lived a past life with her where

they had been happy, and often the times they had been happy in this one were so far from reach they seemed like they might as well have been lived by someone else altogether.

“I feel like...” Will sighed and shook his head, “like I’ve pulled you into my world and now you’re walking around with a target on your back. I don’t want anything to happen to you because...” he cleared his throat and blinked.

“Fuck’s sake,” she let out a short laugh and shuffled her feet; he couldn’t help but return it. She only swore when she was relaxed, which at least gave him some reprieve, “is this how you cheer yourself up after a violent gang beating? Hardcore culpability?”

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it,” Will was left smiling.

“Just because you worry about me doesn’t cancel out my worry for you, get it?”

“We’ll be...” Will caught himself in his slip up in nearly mentioning Abigail, “fine, I mean I will be fine, at Dr. Lecter’s, we’ll be fine there, together.”

Nice save numbnuts, Will berated himself as Alana gave him a curious look. For a moment he thought she might pursue it, but instead she just shook her head.

“So I get the mother hen treatment but he doesn’t?” she asked.

“I lose sleep over all of you, it just gets tiring telling it.”

He knew she didn’t buy it, but there was no energy left in his mind to argue the point. It was difficult to watch her trailer leave, little red lights bumping down the driveway before climbing the small hill. *Another life you might have lived*, it whispered to him as the lights disappeared, winking out like candle flames snuffed.

Not that he had expected anything less, but Lecter’s house was just as grand inside as the outer facade promised. The impressive main double doors led to an atrium with a masculine colour palate of gold, black and blue. Tiled floors covered by beautiful rugs, panelled walls holding works of art, an effusion of fresh white lilies teetering in a vase atop a wire frame table, a docile Gothic fireplace fully equipped with poker and brush despite being clean as a whistle, and two chocolate chairs piled so high with cushions that they were neigh unusable. Will Graham’s first impression of Lecter’s house was almost the same as the one he held of the man himself; *an untouchable aesthetic masterpiece with a surface quality akin to that of light dancing off of deep water, daring you to breach the veneer.*

“The kitchen is down the hall,” Lecter gestured down an adjoining angular, pale blue corridor that led off to the left towards a set of mahogany doors, closed shut, “dining room,” he patted the door in front of them as he walked past, before pointing to another, “and living room. If you will please remove your shoes I will show to you to the guest rooms.”

If he’d still been upset Will would probably have mentioned that Lecter seemed very happy with himself. As it was, drained, tired and on edge, he kept it to himself. He moved through the house on silent socked feet with Abigail trailing him like a ghost, trying to get a handle on the space as they became part of it. Anachronistic in its design and function, and yet modern in its conception, the

house was filled with intricacies that seemed to detract and distract from the truth of the place. The house was a vast showroom, that was how it appeared to Will. A showroom for the world to believe in, and for the man who lived within its walls to pretend.

“You live here alone?” he asked.

“I do.”

“It’s a bit big for just one person,” Will prodded.

“I find it is just big enough,” Lecter side stepped the question, “especially if guests show up on the fly.”

“Happen a lot?” Will asked as they reached the top of the stairs.

Lecter turned to look at him, an enigmatic look strung in place, “I do believe you are projecting, Will.”

“Don’t start,” Will rolled his eyes.

“He’s lonely too?” Abigail offered unhelpfully, making Will round on her with a scowl, “gees, sorry.”

“I think that it is late, and you both need some rest,” Lecter said without prejudice, for which small mercies Will could be grateful.

His room was unfamiliar and quiet. It was unsettling not to hear the patter of paws, sleepy snuffling, the sound of scuffling and muffled woofs as they dreamed. It was odd not to hear the owls in the trees, or smell the lavender scent on the air from beneath his window. It nipped at him not to have the pull of the wards on his senses, like spider silk, waiting for the tug. Lecter’s house had the feel of a fortress, all heavy locks and thick stone walls, but Will didn’t trust it. Couldn’t allow himself the luxury.

The bed wasn’t firm enough for his liking, though the sheets were intensely soft. Will sat down, then let himself fall back and close his eyes. I should tell Jack where I am, he thought. Yet he didn’t move to make the effort. When the door opened after a short knock Will expected to see Abigail’s cautious face peek around the frame. Instead a tray entered first, making him sit up, and then Lecter followed.

“You haven’t eaten since lunch,” he said, putting down the tray on the bedside table, *a plate of dried fruit and nuts, a couple of slices of plain white meat kept cool on a plate of ice, a sliced banana, a cup of what smelled like chamomile tea,* “I assume you are not hungry right now, but if you wake in the night this will save you the trip.”

“...Thanks,” Will managed to resist the need to niggle the man further for his hospitality, *a want to point out all the flaws, to accuse and snap and bite*, “I mean that. Thank you for this.”

“My pleasure,” Lecter stood, brushing off his hands against each other.

“You weren’t my first choice, you know,” Will said slyly, allowing himself a little reprieve to nip at the man’s calm, enjoying Lecter’s blank but affronted stance.

“Colour me surprised,” he replied demurely, “where did I stand in the running?”

“I called Jack, then Beverly,” he was enjoying himself a little too much when he added, “and Zeller,” but he couldn’t hold onto the white lie, “ok, not Zeller. And I wouldn’t have taken Jack.”

“Second then,” Lecter said, “I’ll take runner up over dead last.”

It wasn’t just difficult to notice the trim lines of his figure outlined by the lamp at his back, it was impossible to ignore. Will found himself staring, eyes trailing, until he noted he was being watched and stuttered out a blink, eyes flitting away. He swallowed the feeling down deep, but it only made it *closer*.

“Why did you agree to help me?” Will asked suddenly. It had meant to be nothing but a deflection, but the question he had plucked floating at the top layer of his subconscious had been a prickly one.

“You think me anti-social Will? Enough that I would refuse my home to those who need it?”

“That's not what I meant at all,” Will said seriously; Lecter looked to him, eyes meeting. The silence was still unnerving, *no insight into that enigmatic stare*, “Alana must have told you what I was, what I’ve done. It’s not a decision one makes lightly, to help a man condemned.”

“That is how you see yourself,” Lecter said with fascination, “a man followed by death.”

“Not death. Sin.”

“I did not take you for a church fearing man.”

“I’m not, and I don’t. Sin is older than the church. Sin is intrinsic.”

“Only to those who believe that morals are standardised.”

“Curses don’t have morals,” Will smiled grimly, “they only have targets.”

“A curse is something imposed by others. Yours, I feel, is self inflicted,” when Lecter sat down next to him the bed dipped, making Will’s fingers tighten into the duvet.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he blurted out.

“Then why did you bring it up?”

He had no answer. Will kept his eyes on the far wall, his breath coming in stutters as he took a long, deep lungful in.

“Why did you agree to help me when there’s no way you that can?” Will hated what he was admitting.

“You do not want to let go of it as it is all that you have left of her. I understand.”

“If you do, then you’re just as screwed as I am,” Will tried to laugh but choked on it, “there’s no redemption waiting for me.”

“I like to think of redemption as a tool that’s pointed at both ends. Acceptance is the cork that numbs the pain.”

“You don’t know,” Will shook head head, only then realising that there had been tears waiting to fall, dropping from his chin. He wiped his face fitfully. When the hand appeared on his shoulder Will wished he could remove it, but the weight of it was more comfort than he had received in years, “She was my friend.”

“Blame follows love. You loved her.”

“...Yes,” Will was amazed at the words leaving his mouth, “she was a sister to me. I never thought I’d...” he closed his eyes, fearful of opening them in case he caught sight of **her**, “*please*, I don’t want to see.”

“It is important, Will,” Lecter was close, he could feel him; the hand upon his shoulder became the arm across his back. He stayed stock still, a deer in the headlights, muscles rigid as he felt a hand at his face, cupping his cheek, “open your eyes.”

“Please,” the whisper was barely audible, “*please* don’t do this to me.”

“We construct fairy tales and we accept them,” Lecter’s words drifted into his mind as if from a distant shore; his touch was mesmerizing, warm, and Will began to forget why he should be afraid.

Opening his eyes was like an absolution, only he couldn’t tell who from.

She was crouched there, like a gargoyle at his feet. Her hand resting against his knee. Will couldn’t breathe, everything had stopped. Her hair was like straw, caked in blood and dirt. When she raised her head and caught him with her milky eyed stare he thought he might not know what was real and what wasn’t.

“Our minds concoct all sorts of fantasies when we don't want to believe something,” Lecter’s breath ghosted against his ear, his voice cutting through the horror; Will took a shuddering breath, “yours haunts the very part of you that you cannot bear to loose.”

Reaching up was anathema, his own reaction screaming at him. His hand shook violently. She did not move, just watched him with the same mask she always wore.

“I can’t let her go,” he admitted painfully.

“I did not say you had to,” Lecter told him.

His hand touched her flesh like a believer might touch the hand of god. When she smiled, Will could feel himself breaking open.

The next he knew he was clinging to the man next to him like a lifeline, body shaking as he pressed his face against Lecter’s shoulder, hands clawed tight into his shirt. The world was morphing and changing and Will didn’t think he could stand it. *That he could be absolved of the thing that wrapped him up like fishing wire, cutting into his skin even as it held him together.* Without it, without her hatred of him, he didn’t know how to live with the truth.

“Shh,” Lecter was saying as he held him close, “It is alright.”

“I killed her,” he wept, “*I killed her*! She begged me! She begged me and I-I shot her...”

“It is an absolute rule to always forgive yourself for perceived sins if another has offered it freely,” the words came to him as if he had spoken them himself, as if his own thoughts were given voice, “She trusted you enough to ask you to be the one to take her life. It is the sort of trust most do not see in a lifetime.”

That the pieces slid together through the grief was almost unimaginable, but they did. Slowly *click-click-clicking* together. Little pieces and bits, subtle hints and clues that he had been absorbing subconsciously. Will found himself pulling away from the scaffold of comfort the man provided, shaky but alert. Lecter was watching him, head tilted, eyes showing slight surprise as he lowered his arms. Will stood and moved out into the room, hugging himself tightly. When he turned he knew he looked dangerous; Lecter didn’t seem the type to be intimidated, but he looked like he might at least respect it.

“I asked you, before,” Will said, “and you never answered me. What are you?”

“And I told you,” Lecter replied, “that discovery is mutual.”

“I know what I am, I’m starting to think I’ve never known what you are,” Will said sceptically, keeping his distance, “I warned you, no I *asked* you: no manipulation. And you agreed. If you would break that rule, how do I know you haven’t broken others?”

“It is not manipulation if I am only trying to help you.”

“And white lies are just formalities,” Will spat, “don’t bullshit me, doctor! How do you do it? *Tell me*.”

“How do any of us do anything? How do you know what will come in your dreams, Will? How does the migrating bird know its way home? You call it instinct. I’d rather think of it as beatitude.”

“I should have figured it out sooner,” Will sneered to himself, “how you talked Jack into letting you be my keeper when he could hardly bear to let Alana near me the first time, how you got us into those houses to do the rituals, talked Alana into driving all the way to Wolf Trap in the middle of the night. How you’ve always been able to make me spill open, tell you the things I detest most. This is how you make your fucking living, the psychiatrist that can make you confess anything.”

“No need to cut to the quick,” Lecter said with a raised brow, “I don’t sell myself so short. We are men of many talents, not all of them unearned. I have studied my craft just as you have studied yours.”

“Don’t look for camaraderie here. I’m not the one beguiling people for his own ends.”

“For a man who sees everyone’s secrets, it is rather rude to put all of the blame onto me.”

“But I can’t see yours,” Will said stoutly.

“No. Not mine.”

“Why?”

“Must we go in circles?”

“Then why did you *do it* to me?”

“Because you cannot bring yourself to accept the truth,” Lecter said, standing; Will refused to back down, *though his instincts were telling him to run as the man drew closer and closer still*, “that reality will never change, no matter how you punish yourself for it. I refuse to watch you suffer needlessly. I feel responsible for you in a way neither of us might ever come to terms with.”

As Lecter touched his cheek Will refused to move, but as he opened his mouth to continue Will reached up and put his hand over the man’s mouth. It wasn’t as triumphant as he thought it might be, especially when he felt Lecter smiling against his palm. The man’s eyes were clear and without barrier. Will tried to hold onto his hurt, so as not to fall too hard.

“In a minute I’m going to ask you to leave,” Will said softly, “but first I want you to promise me, and I want you to mean it. Never, *never* do that to me again. Never.”

Lecter reached up and removed Will’s hand, his touch as gentle as a feather and as covetous as a spider touching the fly wrapped in the web. He did not speak, merely lifted a hand, palm flat to his chest, and gave a slow bow. When Lecter stood once more and let go of his hand Will felt lit like a loss, angry at himself that he couldn’t keep the courage of his conviction. Lecter turned and left without another word, closing the door behind him.

“Fuck,” Will said as he sagged, heartfelt in the notion that he was running on a track that couldn’t be derailed no matter how hard he tried.

Chapter End Notes

> This story, and this chapter in particular, have been heavily influenced by a film called 'A Dark Song'. If you love the magical-horror genre, love tense atmospheres and absolutely midblowingly wonderful sountracks, watch this film. It is amazing.

Skin

Chapter Notes

> Just wanted to say thank you for all your kind reviews and encouragement. Things are getting pretty grim in the world at the moment, there are scenes of protest in this chapter that I wrote before the horrible tragedy went down in America regarding George Floyd, this is not meant to be disrespectful. Stand up for your friends, your family, and what is right. #Blacklivesmatter Down with Facism, Down with Racism, Up with Humanity!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain was *clink-clanking* against the gutter pipe outside as it poured from the sky like a never ending biblical event. It made the air in the room spiky, unpleasant. Chilton had never been one for meetings, he preferred to make a choice and then have someone else inform his compatriots of what would be done. So much more efficient, so much more...*regal*. As it was he found himself answering the door for the third time that night, grimacing as his visitor stepped in shaking their umbrella and dripping all over the mat. Clark Ingram should have looked as put out as he did, Chilton was sure, but the man never had anything but a cocksure smile on his face. It was infuriating.

“Make yourself at home,” Chilton said dryly as the man took off his coat and put his umbrella in the stand.

“What a night, huh?” Ingram said, scuffing his feet against the welcome mat, “Couldn’t have postponed?”

“Are you undermining me?” he asked, face unchanging, watching the man as he laughed awkwardly; when Ingram stopped laughing Chilton didn’t break eye contact, “I asked you a question.”

“Wow, someone’s in a mood tonight,” Ingram said, lifting his brows and pulling his chin back to his neck, “hope you’ve got the glasses out because I’m parched.”

The need to punch the man in his smug face had never been more potent. Chilton stayed in the hallway, eyes closed, and took a deep breath as he clenched and unclenched his hands. It took longer than usual to right himself.

The clink of glassware was already ringing on his return to his living room. Decked in out in cream walls, original wooden flooring and dark grey soft furnishings, Chilton had always prided himself on his aesthetic. His profile, his standing as a prominent psychologist and manager of a prominent facility. Things he had worked hard to achieve for them all, his followers, those who *owed* him.

That was a difficult wall to keep up, however, when said aesthetic was being abused by his erstwhile guests. Of them all, Ingram pouring sloppily for Stammets, Eva holding out her glass to ask for seconds rather frantically and Buddish curled up with his arms folded on the only single armchair, Tobias Budge was their only civilised attendant.

“I feel like you’re drawing this out on purpose,” Buddish piped up as Ingram put down the bottle of wine and threw himself lazily onto the couch by Budge who, quite rightly, moved away from the lout, “it should have been over and done with by now.”

“I told you, there’s no need to rush,” Chilton said, standing by the fire that crackled in the centre of the far wall, “do you want another cock up like last time? What good did that do any of us other than loose us two of our more senior members?”

“I don’t know,” Ingram said, eyes always so calculating even above his playboy smile, “worked out well for you.”

“I don’t like what you’re insinuating,” Chilton smiled nastily, “but I won’t refute that their deaths propelled me into a position worthy of my talents. Or have you forgotten whose efforts found all of our prospective players in the first place? If Graham turns out to be our man, it'll be down to *me,*” Chilton took a large sip of wine and savoured the taste on his tongue, “I’ll be the one to right the wrongs.”

“Yes but it all fits, doesn’t it?” Eva piped up, eyes bright; her long, straggling hair made her look unhinged. Chilton wished she didn’t feel the need to act so uncontrollable, but then she was the best at looking after new members, bringing them around to their cause, “It makes sense that it was him all along!”

“Like I said,” Buddish looked up sullenly, his heavy brow and thick jaw set stubbornly as he gestured to Eva in solidarity, “we should be moving this all along. You say we have all the time in the world, but we don’t.”

“Oh, this old chestnut again!” Ingram said with a sweeping gesture, laughing patronisingly, “Elliot, you’d think they were about to bash down your doors and steal you away in the dead of night.”

“The Registry has certainly been more active,” Stammets agreed, ever the toady, “remember the raids of eighty four? A lot of the signs are repeating themselves, like this recent crackdown on unregistered halfbreeds, issuing statements that play down the violence, brainwashing the masses, it’s the same. Soon there’ll be riots and dead in the streets.”

“It’s what they want,” Buddish said darkly, “easier to gun us down legally than to take us against popular vote.”

“You’re all grabbing onto the hysteria train,” Chilton shook his head.

“Oh? Then why are we here, Frederick?” Budge finally spoke up, dark eyes lifting to him as he sipped brandy from a large snifter.

It was difficult to ignore those eyes, watching him closely. Chilton couldn’t help but smile, inclining his head in thanks to the man who had given him back the stage.

“We are here because there has been a change in schedule,” he said, sending a ripple of interest through the room, “Buddish, this should please you. We’re asking Hobbs to escalate the next phase of the plan.”

“About time,” Buddish muttered, a glint in his eye.

“But we’re not all here,” Eva said, glancing around the room, “don’t we need everyone, have a vote or something?”

“A vote?” Chilton spat out the word.

“Yeah, where’s she who shall not be named?” Ingram cut in, grinning, “Not deigning us with her presence?”

“I didn’t invite her,” Chilton said with a shrug.

“If she finds out...” Eva said, twitching with worry.

“She will only find out if one of you degenerates *tells* her, won’t she,” Chilton said tightly, eyeing them one by one, “I don’t want any of this getting back to Lecter.”

“Oh fuck’s sake,” Ingram said sourly, “it’s always fucking Lecter with you, isn’t it. Who cares. He doesn’t bother us, we don’t bother him. He’s never wanted to be involved.”

“It’s not that simple, never has been,” Chilton said, “if her information can be trusted.”

“You saying she *can’t* be trusted now? It was your idea in the first place to put them back together,” Stammets said, looking confused, “I thought she was working with us?”

“Who knows,” Buddish said seriously, “Bedelia has always been her own woman. Would you trust her?”

“I’d trust her intel,” Stammets rejoined, gesturing with his hands.

“Well more fool you Eldon…” Tobias said with a raised brow as he sipped his wine.

Bang, bang, bang . Each thump at his door sent waves of silence across the room, each and every member of their congregation sitting up, *flight or fight*. Chilton turned to face the door, unable to hide his alarm.

“You expecting anyone else?” Ingram asked businesslike, face set, eyes cold, all pretence gone.

“No,” Chilton ground out; scanning the room quickly he lifted a hand and moved it slowly through the air. Everyone sat back, understanding. When his hand reached Budge, Chilton turned it palm up and curled his fingers in. Tobias smiled and stood, walking to him.

“*Kitchen*,” he whispered into the man’s ear when he was close enough.

The pounding at the door was still in full swing as Chilton walked confidently down the hallway, unsure what to expect on the other side. Not that he had ever been a coward, no, he liked to think that he just had a heightened sense of self worth. Enough that he put the chain on before opening the door. When it was pushed back violently, making Chilton retreat as it caught against the chain with a rattling thunk, he was glad he had.

“Chilton? Chilton let us in!”

“What in the *hell* are you doing here!” Chilton recognised the voice, unhooking the chain and opening the door wide; *Garrett and Louise Hobbs, like drowned rats on his doorstep*, “Get in here at once. Did anyone follow you? Has anyone seen you?”

“No, course not,” Garrett said resolutely; Chilton took solace in that at least. The man may have been a lowlife, but Chilton trusted his instincts.

“Get into the kitchen, both of you, you’re making a mess of my floor,” Chilton sneered, watching as they hurried down his corridor.

Always, *always* , Chilton thought angrily as he marched after them and closed the door to the kitchen behind them with a snap, it’s always *something* . Can’t anything go smoothly just for once! He hated that it was becoming a mantra.

“This had better be good,” Chilton said testily, turning back into the room to find the last thing he’d expected.

A gun, an old gun and not very well maintained if he was honest, but a gun nonetheless. Garrett was holding it levelly at him but he could see the quiver in the man’s arm. At his side Louise looked stalwart but petrified. He couldn’t blame her. When Chilton began to laugh, low in his throat, Garrett growled, cocking the old pistol as if to show his resolve.

“We won’t be working for you any more,” Garrett said.

“Oh, *oh* , that’s fantastic,” Chilton clapped his hands together, bending backwards as he laughed.

“You think this is a *joke* ?”

“I think that you don’t regard it as so,” Chilton said, wiping at his eyes, “fatally, some might say.”

“I’m the one with the threats, Frederick,” Garrett said tightly, eyes focused on him intently.

“We want you to leave us alone,” Louise said, voice shaking, “we just want to go. And Abigail. You need to leave her out of this, she’s no more use to you.”

“Really? And why is that?” Chilton asked, still smiling.

“Cause they’re not at that little house in the forest any longer,” Garrett grinned desperately as Chilton’s face fell.

“What are you talking about?” Chilton asked, voice whispery in shock.

“Got scared out,” Garrett looked shifty, “there was someone else there. Took them away.”

“If you could try,” Chilton knew he was furious as he lost control of his tone, “and be, more, *specific!”*

“W-we don’t know w-who he was,” Louise stuttered out, terrified; when Chilton’s stare levelled at her she seized up.

He smiled disarmingly, putting his clasped hands to his chin and stepping forwards, eyes relaxed and open, “Come now, chérie. There is nothing to be scared of. You must have seen him, yes? You could tell me what he looked like?”

She stared at him like a deer in headlights, resisting the need to run. Chilton hated that she wouldn’t just do as she was *told!*

“Don’t tell him anything,” Garret whispered to her.

“Tell me what he looked like!” he barked out, making her start.

“He was...he was tall, dark hair and his eyes, they cut right through,” she said softly, confused by her own words, her lack of fear, “they were the strangest colour, so brown and yet so red, like dark wine.”

He should have known, really. In a way he thought he already might have, considering the man never cared to keep his actions quiet, only his machinations. Hannibal fucking Lecter, Chilton seethed.

“Louise don’t listen to him!” Garrett shouted as Chilton dropped the pretence.

“Now Tobias,” he said lazily, “the woman.”

It wasn’t just the man’s stealth that he found so fascinating as he appeared from the shadows behind the fridge, or his brutality as he stepped up behind Louise Hobbs and slit her throat in one long, deep drag of the chef’s knife. It was the obedience that made Chilton hard, licking his lips as he felt the power some only dream of.

As for Garrett Hobbs, he hadn’t even flinched. On turning his pistol on Tobias he had been disarmed with ease, *candy from a baby*. The gun was turned on him, levelled at his temple. The man looked shocked as he watched his wife crumple to the floor, gurgling in a rather unpleasant manner as she tried to hold her gaping wound closed, blood spewing to the floor in gouts, slaking her clothes, in her hair, under her nails, as her eyes clouded and she gasped her last on his kitchen tiles. But he did not move a muscle to help, did not protest, did not curse or blame. Chilton watched him with interest, like one might an aberrant insect in their collection.

“Not even a tear?” Chilton said as he watched Hobbs watch his wife die, “Would you weep for dear Abigail?”

“You won’t touch a hair on that girl’s head,” Garrett scraped the words out of his throat like a curse.

“Oh but I will, you see,” Chilton said as he walked forwards, stepping over the quickly cooling corpse of Louise Hobbs, careful to avoid the blood, “I get what I want. It’s what makes the waiting worth it. And if you think I’m the sort to abandon years of work for a kink in the wire then you’re dead wrong. Oh, ha,” he smirked at Tobias, “I think that might have been a pun.”

“Goddammit, what do you want!” Hobbs shouted, shaking with frustration.

“You know what I want. I want the proof I need, and then if it shows positive I want him delivered to me. After that, you and your precious Abigail can skip off like two little lambs escaping the slaughterhouse. Comprende?”

He thought there might have been more fight, but the man seemed to be taking him seriously at last. Chilton stood his ground as Hobbs barrelled past him. Only on looking down did he realise that the man had tracked bloody footprints across his floor, as if his wife was still clinging to him now.

“Ugh, the absolute swine, he has ruined my *evening* !” Chilton said furiously, slamming his hand into the nearest counter top; truthfully he wasn’t sure himself if he meant Hobbs or Lecter.

“It’s alright, it will be fine,” Tobias hurried to him, dumping the gun and the blade onto the counter and placing his hands against Chilton’s chest, practically purring, “ we can fix this.”

“You don’t understand, you can’t,” Chilton threw a hand up dramatically, “you’ve never met the man, have you. This won’t be a simple task.”

“I am yours, my love,” Tobias said as his fingers curled, kneading him gently, “I can take care of Lecter, for you, just for you.”

“Oh my sweet beau,” Chilton gripped Budge’s right hand and lifted it to his lips, suckling his middle finger into his mouth, swirling his tongue against the digit so as to taste the sweet blood there. Tobias’ breath hitched, mouth left open, inviting, his pupils wide. It came away with a soft pop, “I know you will,” looking over to what had once been a woman atop the slowly widening pool of crimson he smiled, shark like, “at least we won’t have to order out.”

The kiss was rough; Chilton gripped the back of the younger man’s neck as he devoured him, the smell of blood thick in his nostrils, the feel of Budge’s sweet, caramel flesh bending at the slightest pressure. *I can take care of Lecter, for you, just for you.* The plea was so heartfelt, so lusty and verdant with devotion, that Chilton allowed himself a sweet moment to believe it could be true. As he pushed Budge to his knees and watched the man undo his fly with greedy fingers, Chilton couldn’t help but picture the spectre of the man that haunted them all standing in the shadows. *Maroon eyes watching their every move as if it were the punchline to a particularly funny joke.*

“*Are you kidding me?” she asked, face set and unimpressed, “That’s not a solution.”*

With Buster on his lap, Will had been forced to sit up on the chair, legs folded, and accommodate the dog’s fussy need for comfort. When he didn’t answer Miriam sat back on the couch with a large slice of pizza in her hands and shook her head, staring at the TV.

“*Can you use a plate, please?” Will groused, “Like a civilised person?”*

“This from the man who just admitted to me he’s planning to spend the rest of his life as a hermit.”

“Yeah, and you’re not helping, turning up at my door with take out and destroying my mission for complete solitude.”

For a second she looked like she might lash out, but instead stuck out her tongue. He laughed, shaking his head, stroking Buster’s rough fur as the dog snuffled in his sleep, paws twitching. They watched tv in silence for a little while, or for as long as Miriam was able to stand it. Will was sure he could go on living in silence forever if he tried hard enough.

"*Just seems a shame, is all," she said as she threw her crust back into the box.*

"What, that you don't eat the crust? That's borderline criminal, you know," Will said sarcastically.

"*I mean it, Will," she sighed, "fuck's sake, after all the shit you've been through you at least deserve to find someone that can make you happy."*

"*Don't start this conversation all over again, it's so fucking cliché," Will sighed, "how happy would you be living with someone who projected their thoughts at you twenty four seven, who you couldn't touch without knowing all their sordid little secrets? Doesn't exactly make for wedding vows does it? Anyway when's the last long term relationship you had?"*

"The Bureau is my long term relationship," she countered, shrugging, "might as well have a ring on my finger."

"Nice excuse," Will said sourly.

"*At least I have an excuse, Mister Consultant," she taunted.*

"*Better that than in a loveless marriage with a government body," he said deadpan.*

"Just forget it," she stopped, sighing.

The sound from the TV seemed loud as their conversation dried up. Will felt it like a physical buffer. Letting out a sound of frustration he licked his bottom lip and forced himself to think of something, to speak up.

"*Anyway, I'm not really alone," Will tried to cheer her up, "Got the mutts don't I? And I have you."*

"Wow, such charm! Good to know I'm second in the running," her laugh was strained as she stared at him, affronted, but he knew she was trying to lighten the mood, "I think this means it's your turn to get me more dip, so I can eat your oh so precious crusts."

"*I can't," Will pointed at Buster just as Miriam reached forwards and crinkled a Doritos packet; the little dog woke up with a start, ears perked, and jumped from Will's lap to stretch and wag his stumpy tail, sniffing at Miriam with his paw raised, "traitor," Will said half heartedly, "alright fine."*

His legs were stiff, toes tingling with pins and needles, making him shake his feet as he walked to the kitchen. The room was dark but the light from the fridge was enough to go by. Behind him she was laughing, he thought he could hear her laughing at something, something he couldn't quite make out…

"What are you..?" he turned and stopped dead.

His kitchen was gone, as was the living room beyond the open door, the sounds of the dogs and the sounds of laughter. Will stopped stock still, blinking, mouth left hanging open with words unsaid.

On turning to look jerkily at the fridge he'd expected to be there Will found a well kept wardrobe, all shirts and suit jackets and trousers hung neatly, ties rolled away in see through drawers, shoes sitting angled in pairs on racks. When he managed to take note of his body beyond the jarring

transition he found his hands gripped tight around the wardrobe doors. He let go on instinct, backing away as the doors swung shut, bouncing noisily.

“Will?”

“Oh jesus,” Will whispered, shaking his head as he forced himself to look.

There, to his right, Lecter was propped up on a forearm in his bed, watching him. *How long?* Was the question that sprang to his messy mind as his eyes sprinted about the room, taking in everything, *the long striped cushion atop the love-seat at the end of the bed, the grand headboard in turquoise and gold, those two colours extending out into the room, colouring the ceiling and the walls which, in turn, were decked in beautiful Japanese prints much like those in Lecter’s waiting room.* Finally his eyes came back to the truth of his situation, the man watching him with the ever present calm acceptance. As Lecter sat up Will retreated further into the room, swallowing as the covers fell away revealing skin over muscle.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” was all Will could offer as he shook his head, coming to his senses and heading for the door only to be blocked by sleepy eyes.

“What’s going on?” Abigail asked, rubbing her face tiredly and pulling her long dark hair back into a ponytail.

“Nothing,” Will said quickly, ushering her out of the way; she moved back dramatically as he barged past, rolling her eyes.

Are you two having sex*?* At first the question had been so clear, so frank, that Will thought she had said it aloud.

“Fucking christ Abigail! No, we are *not.* I was sleepwalking. Go back to bed.”

“I didn’t say anything!” she argued, frowning; Will realised his mistake and blushed, making Abigail smirk in return, “Nice excuse by the way,” she said, smarmy as he marched across the landing.

“Will you shut the hell up and go back to your room..?” he bit out fractiously; as he gripped his door and turned to throw something equally nasty, he stopped as Lecter appeared at his doorway, pulling on a heavy robe over his sleeping trousers, “and don’t you fucking start either!”

The man merely looked at him with unwarranted warmth as he tied the forest green robe shut, hair not yet brushed back to its pin-neat perfection.

“I suppose breakfast will be early today,” Lecter said, voice husky with sleep, “any preferences Abigail?”

“I don’t care,” she shrugged capriciously.

“Then I think crepes, they are always perfect for the indecisive morning diner,” he said as he padded out onto the landing and headed for the stairs, stopping to look over his shoulder, “how do you take your coffee, Will?”

Slamming the door in his face seemed reasonable at the time.

The shower was screaming hot, enough to hope that it could eradicate the prickle on his skin, *It would be today, someone today,* and the tightness in his abdomen, *warm hands against his face, his neck, revelling in the easy erotica of sheer touch.* To say that it didn't help was an understatement. Lecter's shower room was incredible, he'd admit it. *Maybe it had already happened.* A wet room in grey tile, jungle plants infesting the corners and the window ledges, peace lily's, dragon trees, spider plants. *What if you're not the only one who feels the connection? What does Lecter dream of in that fucking beautiful room of his?* It felt dark and enveloping, the lights dimmed. *Maybe, what if...it was happening right now? Scalpel, Finochietto retracter, bags to keep the organs fresh.* The massive shower head was another bonus, as was the array of expensive and wonderful smelling gels and moisturisers the man owned.

It was difficult to keep the worlds separate. Never his forte, he knew that. In the arena of his mind there was no room for the thoughts he wished to stay sacred. Will chastised himself as he lathered his skin, unable to stop his mind from wandering. The geranium scented shower gel was thick and rich as he pulled it across his chest, *the y-incision to split them, peel them like a ripe fruit,* fingers curling into his skin as his other hand descended lower and lower, *would he touch you if you asked him? Would you ask him?* Wasn't surprised to find himself half hard, taking hold with a soft moan, head falling back into the spray. He wished it was simple, to take what he wanted from the memories, but everything was falling apart, all of the pieces crumbling together, each indiscernible from the next.

Breathy words whispered into his ear as the man held him, fingers against his skin. Not difficult to turn, no, be pushed back against the soft sheets. They eat them, don't they. They devour the dead like a funeral rite. *Lecter was taller than he was, broader in the shoulders. Stronger. Will was sure he wouldn't be able to stop him if he decided to overpower him.* The seal was key, somehow it was everything, sitting there like a puzzle box asking to be solved. *Would you want him to? Probably not. Probably? Ok, I'm not sure. The skin he had seen as Lecter sat up was taut, prime, made him seem far younger than he came across. It would be soft beneath his fingers.* What name will you be adding to the lost memorial? Who will remember these poor wretches? No open casket for the empty ones. *Would the man react? He seemed to react to nothing with any passion. Would he? If Will gave himself openly would he..?*

The orgasm was short lived as he bit into his lip a little too hard, hissing in pain. Brought everything sharply into focus, the water splashing against the tile, the smell of the foam on his skin, the aching bruises at his chest and back, on his face though they had faded a little. The sickness in his gut as he washed the soap from his skin harshly.

"Banished to wet dreams and jerking off in the shower," Will groaned, "you're a sad sack, Graham, you know that, don't you. Fuck's sake."

Staring into the mirror, Will didn't like what he saw. *The bruises had yellowed and browned, leaving him like an autumn leaf, sickly*. And now his split lip didn't help. It clashed with his beard, making him look like a down and out. Rummaging through his bag he'd brought from home Will made a quick decision as he turned on the electric shaver and pressed it to his skin.

He held onto that thought as he dried and dressed himself, then left the house without breakfast or so much as a goodbye. In truth he wished he could have spoken to Abigail. Wanted to talk to her, make sure she was ok, needed to tell her about her trial. Only he wasn't willing to risk being talked into anything that would keep him from work. That he had asked Lecter not to use his unusual power was one thing, it was another altogether to trust the man to keep his word.

The world was a malaise of grey, from the sky to the buildings to the road, all soaked by nightly rain. At every stop light he checked his phone, amazed that a message from Jack wasn't waiting there for him, blazoned in the man's frank tone. So distracted was he by the lack of communication that he hadn't paid attention to his destination until the last second. He hadn't expected it, but when he saw it he wasn't exactly surprised.

"Fucking great," Will said as he pulled up the handbrake and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

The gathering was centred around the leafy and understated entrance to Quantico's car park. Unnaturals and their supporters, every last one it seemed. There were maybe only forty of them, which made their protest seem all the sadder for it. Yet what they lacked in numbers they made up for in effort, he would give them that. Banners and placards held high, shouts loud enough to be heard through his closed windows from across the street. The woman at the head of it all had a handheld megaphone with which she led a chant, *'The truth for Jessica! The truth for Michael! The truth for..!'*. A memorial, he thought guiltily, here's your memorial. A litany of failure.

The police standing by the sidelines weren't looking worried, but Will didn't trust that. He'd seen peaceful protests devolve into violence too many times. He drove up slowly to the gate that led to the long, tree lined car park, feeling their hatred from a dozen paces, their fear leaching into the cab like smog. As he approached it only worsened. They converged like hyenas on a kill, only the police and temporary barriers keeping them at bay. As they rattled their placards and screamed their hate Will was amazed to see some of them without their glamours, *showing teeth as fangs, skin as fur, horns poking up through hair, cloven hooves instead of feet.*

"*Justice for everyone, pig!*" seemed to be a favourite, as well as "*Traitor!*". It seemed that Freddie Lounds' little expose had done its damage.

"Morning mister Graham," the guard nodded from his booth, voice muffled as he kept the window closed; Will had to strain to hear him over the shouts and yells of the crowd, "I was told to pass a message. Agent Crawford is waiting for you in lecture hall three."

Will nodded in reply, lifting a hand in thanks as the gates rolled open. The relief was palpable as he drove in, *as if he could breathe again*. The emotional turmoil melting away, leaving behind only his own fears and doubts and anger. And soon there will be another name for them to add to their memorial; it was all he could think as he parked, sitting for longer than he'd meant to, staring at the trees as the snow melted from the branches, as heavy, grey clouds converged and rain began to spatter against the windscreen. Taking a long, deep breath, Will opened his door forcefully and stepped out as the downpour began.

"It seems we will not be joined for breakfast today," Hannibal said as they listened to the main door slam.

To say he was disappointed was an understatement, but to say he was surprised would have been foolish. It seemed Will didn't take kindly to embarrassment, and even less kindly to people probing into his private business. It would take work, delicate work, to gain his trust. Last night he had been greedy, difficult to resist with the man so close and so vulnerable. He had pushed too hard and been burned in the process. *Will was sharp as a razor, the first he had ever discovered able to realise the*

manipulation before it was complete. Hannibal found it impossible not to revel in it, even as it inconvenienced him.

Will Graham was…everything he'd ever hoped for. More even.

"He's weird about personal stuff," Abigail shrugged, helping herself to another crepe, loading it with whipped cream.

"Aren't we all," Hannibal said as he squeezed a slice of lemon over his own breakfast and wiped his hands on a heavy napkin.

"Um, Hannibal..? Can I call you Hannibal?"

"If you like," he said amiably.

"Are you friends? Will called you his friend."

"I like to think so."

"Then why doesn't he call you by your first name?" she asked, niggling.

"Will likes to keep people at arm's length by any means possible," Lecter said.

"He calls me Abigail," she shot back.

"That is because he cares about you a great deal," Lecter said without hesitation, making Abigail look to her breakfast, abashed; the breakfast table became quiet and Hannibal let out a short sigh. Today's plan would have to be changed, though he thought that it might be simpler in the long run with this new addition, "are these the only clothes you have?" he asked as he gestured to her oversized plaid shirt and long shorts held up with a belt.

"Yeah," she said brazenly, "Will loaned them to me."

"I can tell," he said, smiling, "I thought perhaps we could go to the shops and get you something more fitting."

"What is this?" she said, watching him with dark eyes over a sharp, coy smile, "Trying to groom me or something?"

The laugh he let loose was long and low but showed teeth, "Sorry, my darling, but you aren't my type."

She raised a brow and stared at him, unimpressed. After shovelling the rest of her breakfast into her mouth in record time, enough that Hannibal couldn't help but find it rather vulgar, she sat back and stretched.

"Fine. You're rich, right? If you're going to buy me stuff it better be nice."

He would admit it was rather pleasant having a fresh, foolishly naive mind around him as he moved through his day. Sort of like a pet, he was sure this was how people with pets felt. He could maybe understand the appeal she had to Will, *a tragic soul trapped in a teenager's body*.

She was amazed at the Bentley, looking around conceitedly as they drove into town. She chattered

away, singing like a canary at every question he asked. Too young and too short-sighted to even understand that he might be exploiting her first hand knowledge of his real target.

“He’s kind of crazy, but I like him,” Abigail was saying.

“Crazy? I wouldn’t say so,” he prompted.

“Well you wouldn’t, you haven’t seen him nearly sleep walk off his own roof,” she scoffed.

“Somnambulism can take us many places, but it does not denote mental health issues.”

“What about sneaking out in the middle of the night to run around in the woods with his dogs?” she offered.

“That doesn’t sound too implausible,” Hannibal rebutted.

“*Naked*,” she said, orotund.

“Oh, well yes, that is a little odd,” he admitted as he filed the information away.

“I can’t believe he just left like that. I really needed to speak to him,” she continued huffily.

“About your ritual?” he asked simply.

She blanched, eyes wide, “How did you know? Did he *tell* you?”

“Of course not. Will holds you very close to his heart, little one.”

“Then how’d you know?” she asked sceptically.

“The magic in your skin is most profuse,” Lecter said as he found a parking space, pulling in smoothly, “I can smell it.”

“You can smell magic,” she said flatly with an unimpressed stare.

“To an extent,” Lecter said as he brought up the handbrake.

“What are you, some sort of witch hunter?”

Hannibal laughed genuinely as he turned off the engine, noting her narrow stare, “You need not fear for dear Will. I would see him further from harm, not closer to it.”

Then her narrow eyed stare became a wide eyed stare became a triumphant look. She looked at him smugly.

“Oh my god, you’re *into* him, aren’t you?”

“Come, if we don’t go soon we’ll miss the quiet time before the hoards descend,” Hannibal deigned not to answer, “I’d rather not be trapped in with the rabble.”

“*Wow*,” she said, giggling even as she feigned embarrassment at his attitude, “this is all so baroque.”

“Ok, you look like *shit*,” Zeller said unreservedly.

“I try,” Will said, rubbing at his cheek self-consciously, hair dripping into his eyes.

On arriving at the Lecture hall Will had been glad to find Jack and Jimmy absent, for different but equally good reasons. Jack because he wasn’t quite ready to spin his new lie to the man, and Jimmy because at that moment he didn’t think he could face the man’s upbeat attitude. At least with Zeller he knew where he stood, and with Beverly he could rely on some support. Who would have fucking thought, Will told himself wryly.

“What happened?” Beverly, who had been messing with the projector, asked as she looked up and caught sight of his face.

“I’m not really in the mood to tell it twice,” Will evaded, “I’m sure Jack will pitch a fit when he sees, if you’re really interested you can listen in.”

She didn’t look impressed, and for a moment, just a *split-second*, he thought he could see Miriam’s face over hers. *The same blunt set to her mouth, eyes that spoke of a need to shout some sense into him*. Will looked away quickly, scanning the empty lecture hall. Picking a seat at the front he pulled off his wet jacket and mussed his hair to help it dry before sitting. When he looked up he’d expected it to be Beverly, ever unwavering in the face of his bullshit, demanding answers.

Instead he found Brian Zeller, looking pissed off and unsure of himself; before Will could open his mouth to offer something cutting Zeller beat him to it, “Look, can we talk? Somewhere?”

Will hesitated, rubbing at a twitch in his right eye, before looking back at the man; *his mind a mass of uncertainty, veiling it like a bride about to flee from a wedding*.

“Sure,” he relented with a short sigh, “come on.”

They left the lecture hall under the watchful eye of Beverly, out into the empty corridor lined down one side with large windows. Will squinted at the natural light, eyes adjusting. Next to him Zeller fidgeted before putting his hands on his hips.

“What is it? Looking to get a few shots in yourself before Jack sees the bruises?” Will couldn’t help but mock.

“What? *No*, jesus,” Zeller frowned, hesitating again before closing his eyes and grinding out, “I’m sorry, ok?”

“For what?” Will asked dryly, frowning.

“You’re kidding me right?” Zeller let out a choked laugh, “For all my bullshit. How I’ve been treating you.”

“Brian, if you think that *your* bullshit is the sort of thing I’ve been waiting desperately, aching for an apology over, then you’ve severely underestimated the kind of bullshit I’m subjected to on a daily basis,” Will said with a raised brow.

“Wow,” Zeller said, shaking his head and smirking, “you really can’t even take an apology? Come on!”

“I don’t need it,” Will said sourly, “it’s not an apology, you just want me to say I forgive you. Well, I never really blamed you in the first place, happy?”

“Not really,” Zeller ground out, “So what? You’re just so inured to people spouting hate at you that it’s become the norm? Yeah, that makes me real fucking happy.”

“Oh what do you care all of a sudden?” Will spat.

“I was trying to apologise!” Zeller shouted before reigning himself back in, closing his eyes and seeming to fight the urge to continue his diatribe.

And there, amidst the chaos, floated the nugget of truth Will hadn’t been expecting to find. Thoughts straying, images of a girl, images of a woman, images of childhood, adulthood, *growing up.* Will felt his face soften, just a little. As Brian opened his eyes he caught Will staring at him before looking away, contrite.

“What is she to you? Your sister?” he asked, making Zeller curse.

“Fucking hell, can’t you keep to your fucking self for *five minutes*?”

“I’m sorry, ok! I can’t help it if you’re projecting!”

“Projecting? Give me a break!”

“When people get angry they force the things they don’t want to think about up into their conscious thought processes,” Will explained angrily, “and when I get angry I find it difficult to control what I pick up and what I block out. If I could don’t you think I would?” he added bitterly.

It seemed like, any second, Zeller might take him up on his first offer of a punching match. Instead the man sagged, turning to lean against the wall and stare at the floor. Will wondered if Beverly was listening in, or if she really trusted Zeller enough to leave him alone with Will while they screamed blue murder at one another. It gave him a little reassurance as to Zeller’s character that she had, at least.

“She’s my stepsister,” Brian admitted eventually, “my dad remarried after mom died.”

“She’s a halfbreed,” Will said, amazed that the admission out loud made Zeller scan the corridor in a panic.

“Could you..? Not so loud?”

“Bone of contention is it?” Will asked caustically.

“Look, we’ve had our differences, but even you understand that it’s not just the unnaturals that get the flack, it’s the families too. I don’t like magic, all it has done is caused me fucking grief since I was thirteen and she showed for the first time. And no, before you ask, I don’t care that she’s different. She’s my sister, always will be, I don’t care who her fucking mother is.”

Will scratched at his scalp, itching as the rainwater began to dry. They stood in silence, respecting each other’s boundaries, until Will felt that Zeller might not be able to stand it any longer.

“What is she?” he asked softly.

“Nothing you’ll have heard of,” Zeller said, the comeback so slick that Will was sure he used it a lot.

“You’d be surprised,” Will said, catching the man’s eye.

“...Yeah, I guess I would,” Brian said, frown loosening, “she’s nuckelavee.”

“Wow, really? Are you serious?” Will couldn’t hide his genuine surprise, “I’ve never met one. I thought they were all relegated to their homeland. Her parents Orcadian?”

“Shetlanders. And the laws have been loosened over there for a while,” Zeller sounded uncomfortable talking about it.

“Can she do the water horse thing?” he asked, genuinely interested, “You know, transform?”

“No,” Zeller looked at him as if he were a rube; Will couldn’t help but smile, “her hands and feet are webbed though.”

“That’s...*amazing*,” Will said, blinking, thinking back through his codex of mythical creatures to try and remember anything salient about Scottish folklore. When he realised how uneasy Zeller was he took pity, changing the subject, “look. Apology accepted, ok?” when Zeller looked to him with surprise and nodded, Will made to walk back into the lecture hall.

“Wait,” Brian blurted out, stopping him.

Just then the door at the end of the long corridor clicked and swung open, letting in the sound of chattering and footfalls. Jack and Jimmy, in heated conversation as they led in the entire of Jack’s team from floor three, from researchers to admin staff. The crowd was slowly advancing on them, even as it paid them no heed. Will felt Zeller tug at his shirt and looked back to find the man close. The need to back away was tight and hot but Will stood his ground when he saw the ardent look in Zeller’s eyes.

“Last night,” the man spoke quickly, just above a whisper, “Jack took me and a couple of guys from security and we went out to the Motel 6 near Charles Village. Freddie Lounds was there and he threatened to arrest her.”

“So..?” Will frowned as the cavalcade grew closer, “What Jack has a conscience now?”

“He let her go,” Zeller continued sharply, “on the condition she do something for him. I think he wants her to spy...” his eyes flicked over Will’s shoulder as he cut himself short, looking worried.

When he shoved him, hard, Will hadn’t been expecting it. Not enough to stop himself from stumbling, or to keep the barrage of thoughts at bay: *Play along, play along, for fuck’s sake play along!*

“Why don’t you shut your fucking mouth, huh?” Zeller shouted.

“Screw you, you dickless piece of shit!” Will joined in, sensing Zeller’s relief as footsteps began running towards them, “why don’t you just..!”

“Hey! Break it up!”

Jack hurried in between them, reaching out to push Zeller back, and then Will.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” Will hissed as Jack hesitated, “and *you*,” he pointed at Zeller, watching the man stare at him with a good approximation of anger, “just stay away from me.”

Behind them the rest of the staff stood staring, either in silence or muttering to one another, all eyes levelled at him. Will knew he wasn’t exactly liked, but the thoughts he picked up were nastier than he’d expected.

Showing his true colours at last.

Bout time someone stood up to that fucking witch.

What was Crawford thinking, letting that thing in here?

So long, it had been so long since he allowed himself to see the thick, black caustic bile that coated everything around him. Everything he touched, whether by hand or by mind, left him feeling violated somehow. Everything left him tainted by its involvement. *Left him feeling chipped away at, as if he were a rock waiting to crack open and crumble down to dust.* Sometimes he felt like he wouldn’t know when the last hit would come, the one that would cause the fault to rupture. Other times he didn’t think about it, because it was the only option left. The rest of the time he remembered why he had bought Wolf Trap in the first place.

Going back inside was as small a reprieve as he could manage. He strode back to his seat as Beverly finished setting up. When she joined him, sitting down slowly, he could feel her hesitancy.

“Just spit it out, would you?” he said dourly.

“Ok, for one I think I should scratch my hopes for any group harmony,” she said airily as they both listened to the ruckus from outside, “and two, you really should have kept the beard. Why the hell didn’t you tell me how young you are? I feel like your mother.”

“*What?*” Will asked incredulously as he looked at her, blind-sided by the comment.

“You’re one of those guys that grows facial hair so they don’t get ID’d at clubs aren’t you,” she said sarcastically; when he looked at her like she had two heads she continued, “What are you, late twenties, early thirties?”

“Screw you too, what am I getting carded?” Will said incredulously, “I’ll be forty four in three months.”

“Are you kidding me?” she asked flatly. When he didn’t reply she sat up, staring, each word said with significance, “*Shut up*.”

“Yeah I get that a lot,” Will muttered as the rest of their colleagues poured in, “you gonna tell me what all this is about?” he asked, pointing to the projector.

“I can’t believe you, you lucky sun of a bitch,” she muttered, shaking her head; when he gave her a look she took a breath and continued, “Registry sent a presentation, apparently. Something to do with how to talk to the press, how to avoid any incidents, keep the peace with the Unnaturals, etcetera. Now that we’re living in the media world with this case, and all.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” Will said, letting his head fall back and closing his eyes.

It passed in a malaise of patronising, bureaucratic nonsense. Passive aggressively training them to put the Registry before themselves, put their work and caseload before citizens, but not in so many words. The same crap he’d been sold a hundred times whenever a story this big broke the news. Will barely watched it, instead noting that Jack had sat on Beverly’s left, and kept Zeller on the other side, furthest from Will. *Spying on what?* He wondered. Part of him was tempted to try and glean the man’s meaning from him here and now, but the crowd made it difficult to focus, and a slip up could be devastating. Instead he slumped in his chair and waited.

It was half way through when Will felt Beverly nudge him in the ribs. He sat up, frowning, but stalled on seeing her serious expression. Beyond her Jack was stony, silent. On noticing Will his eyes hardened and he nodded, typing something quickly and holding up the phone. Will was sure he knew what it would say even before he saw it.

We’ve had the call.

Steeling himself, Will stood up with the rest of them and left the presentation, walking like a funeral procession out the swing doors.

“This too? Are you sure?” she held out her arm and allowed Hannibal to drape the dress over the rest of the clothes she had collected.

“And here I thought you were going to be angry if I didn’t lavish my credit card on your wardrobe,” Hannibal said as he abandoned a rail of overly showy skirts, flicking away the garish material.

“Well, yeah, but I was just being a brat. Didn’t think you’d actually do it,” she said, looking at her haul.

“There’s no harm in trying them all on,” Hannibal said casually as he scanned the shop, *allowing him to see his target as she prowled behind them, hiding in the clothing racks,* “I’m sure there must be some young lady here who would help you. Ah! Excuse me miss?”

A tall, pretty shop assistant who was wearing just that little bit too much make up caught his eye, smiling as she approached on kitten heels.

“Hello, can I help? Oh my,” she said, trying to keep her smile as she noted Abigail’s atrocious clothing, “a change of wardrobe huh?”

“Necessary, as you can see,” Hannibal said offhandedly, “I would appreciate if you could assist in the changing rooms?”

“I can do it myself,” Abigail said, looking at him superciliously.

“And who will fetch you other sizes and such?” Hannibal overrode, making her sigh.

“Sure thing,” the shop assistant waited until they were done, plastering on her retail charm, “Changing rooms are right this way. You’re dad treating you, is he?”

“Oh, he’s not my dad,” Abigail said with a sly smile in Hannibal’s direction, “I only met him yesterday.”

The shop assistant looked alarmed, quite rightly Hannibal thought even as he began to change his mind about her naiveté being the only thing that had attracted Will to Abigail. Hannibal merely smiled at the woman.

“My niece has a rather dry sense of humour,” he said, allowing the assistant to relax and laugh it off.

“You had me going there,” she said as she led Abigail into the women’s changing area.

“I’ll wait for you here, darling,” Hannibal said with an edge to his voice that seemed to make Abigail pause.

“Yeah, whatever,” she shrugged, hurrying after the woman as she chattered on.

It was simple to do, so simple that it was almost boring. Abigail would be a while working her way through all those clothes, he thought, more than enough time to deal with their mutual problem. Taking off his heavy overcoat Hannibal hung it up on a tall rack, puffing out the shoulders with a coat hanger. Then he stalked back out into the shop, *keeping her in his peripheral*. He had chosen a nice, neutral blue for his suit today, with a barely discernable brown check and white shirt, *blue paisley tie to match*. A simple colour for blending in, as he walked to a rack of blue embroidered fleeces, next to a rack of blue cardigans, and behind them cagoules in shades of blue, moving through quickly enough that he could double back around the display and end up behind her as she rushed in to follow.

A quick tap on her left shoulder and she let her guard down on her right, allowing him to slip her small purse down over her arm and collect her phone from her hand in one simple gesture. As she turned around, stepping back from him, her red curls bouncing, she looked like she might call out.

Hannibal lifted a finger to his lips and tutted, “Freddie, Freddie,” he said as he looked into her bag and raised his brows, lifting out a small pistol, testing the weight of it in his hand before dropping it back into the purse, “short for Frederica?”

She stayed silent, fuming; when she made to snatch her phone back Hannibal lifted it high, causing her to run into him. He caught her around the back, holding her close like a lover as she squirmed.

“Shall we look at them together?” he asked as he brought the phone down to eye level, but at arm’s length; as he tapped the lock screen came up, “if you would, Miss Lounds? Or should I call..?”

“*No*...Seven, four, nine, eight, three, five,” she ground out, cutting off his threat.

“Much obliged,” he offered as he cycled through her photographs, *he and Will standing by the Lewis household, a video of them talking about the case with appalling sound quality, Abigail playing with Will’s eclectic mutts in Wolf Trap, Will leaving Lecter’s own front door, the most recent a video of Hannibal and Abigail shopping together,* “this is most unethical, even for a tabloid journalist,” he said as moved to her settings and checked, “no back ups,” he noted, “rather risky.”

“I don’t...” she seemed to be looking for a way out even as she answered him, eyes scattering over the store, hands ready to push, legs ready to run, “keep back ups...easier to fake a source if you can prove you never took the shot.”

“Impressive,” Hannibal said as he began deleting the photographs and videos, one at a time, “but foolish,” once he was done he released her, moving away to stand just out of reach, “Who is your employer?” Hannibal asked, his tone smooth as silk.

“Jack Crawford,” she said, blinking in shock at her own words, “he...he asked me to keep tabs on Graham, where he goes, who he sees.”

Hannibal wasn’t surprised at all. Jack Crawford, the bulldog of Quantico, wouldn’t let his prize out without a leash with which to pull him back on. Yet still, there was something that didn’t sit quite right, like a warped object seen through a prism, no line matching up to the next exactly. He could make out what he was looking at, but as of yet not entirely see the hands that had made the image possible.

“Ah but an opportunistic entrepreneur like yourself wouldn’t limit your buyers to just one,” he said as he stalked in closer, taking her hand in his and smiling, “who else is in your little black book?”

That she didn’t answer, even though the muscles around her mouth twitched with the need to, was telling in itself. *Afraid, you are so very afraid.* Hannibal tilted his head down, staring into her blue-grey eyes, searching for the tell. *Afraid of the death that would come swiftly to you.* His fingers gently rubbed at her palm, thumb tracing the hairs on the back of her hand.

“I...” she resisted even as she fell down the rabbit hole, eyes glazing over, “don’t know who they were. I just got paid, sent the photos to an email address.”

“These photos?” he asked, indicating to the phone.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“I see,” Hannibal let go of her hand peremptorily; she snatched it back as if he had burned her, blinking her eyes and looking alarmed, while Hannibal set about dropping her phone back into her purse and clipping it closed. When she made to take it back from him he did not let go, watched her hesitate anxiously as they both held the bag together, her eyes glued to him intently, “I must impart on you the seriousness of this invasion of privacy. How should we go about that, Miss Lounds?” he asked as she began to look like a frightened rabbit realising the snare was already around her throat.

When Abigail returned, handing the things she wasn’t keen on to the assistant, holding the things she liked in her hands, she found Hannibal Lecter right where she had left him.

“Ready?” he asked her with a small smile, both of them heading to the check out, footsteps in time.

They were led into the city, back towards the centre of Baltimore. Will sat in the back, staring out the window, thumb nail in his mouth. No one talked, which he found rather disquieting. Of anyone he knew Will loved quiet more than most, but between others he found it unsettling. In the front Jack and Zeller seemed miles from them, and in the seat next to him Beverly was working quickly and strictly on her laptop, Jimmy on the far side doing something on his phone. When his own phone rang Will thanked his lucky stars that he wouldn’t have to spend the whole journey in torturous muteness.

“Graham,” he said succinctly.

“Um, hello. This is Milly, I don’t know if you remember...”

“Milly, yes, hello,” he sat up in his seat, “what can I do for you?”

“Actually, it’s more what I can do for you,” she said, “I asked around, like you wanted. Seems there have been more people than we realised gone missing.”

“How many?” Will asked, pulling out a pad and pen from his pocket, “Do you have their details?”

“Look...” she hesitated, sighing, “this isn’t just my neck on the line. I can’t give you any names.”

“Why not?” Will frowned.

“Because everyone we spoke to who has lost someone doesn’t want the past dug up around them. They didn’t report the deaths, ok? They just buried them and...you understand, don’t you? They are terrified the Registry will come looking into their business, find a reason to take them in. Look around, Will, they take people whenever they want, and they don’t need approval. The only reason I’m not in some Registry interrogation cell right now is because Mike was never a Grey-Pelt so they have no need to question me. I can thank him for that at least,” she said sadly.

“Wait, the people who are missing, they were all registered?” he frowned.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“But Mike wasn’t.”

“No, he wasn’t when he died. But he was when he was a kid. Changed his name after he ran away from home and started running with us.”

“What was his name before he changed it?” Will asked.

“What’s it matter?”

“Please, Milly, humour me.”

“It was Hanlon, Michael Rufus Hanlon. Please, I don’t think I can help any more than I have. I just wanted to let you know you were right, but I can’t give you names.”

“Ok. It’s ok I understand. Is there anything else you can give..?”

Then he stopped, blinking, like the floor had opened up and dropped him out into the void. *Suddenly, somewhere, a switch flipped and a burning light began to blind him.* When he heard Milly’s voice from the other end asking if he was still there he offered a quick, “yeah. Look I appreciate you calling. If you find anything else, let me know,” before hanging up.

Sitting back in his seat Will noticed Beverly was watching him.

“Anything useful?” Jack asked loudly fro the driver’s seat.

“Milly Grey-Pelt,” Will replied as he wrote the name ‘*Hanlon’* onto his notepad along with ‘*Inman*’ and ‘*Salome’* and the rest of the victim surnames they knew of, *Hoit* and *James*, “Jessica Salome,” he said slowly, “she wasn’t married.”

“No, divorced,” Zeller offered, “why?”

“Did she keep the name?”

“What, her own name?”

“No, did she keep her husband’s name when she got divorced?” Will asked tightly.

“Oh, right, yeah she did.”

“What was her name? Her real name?” he asked fervently, making Beverly watch him close, as if seeing something building in him she couldn’t explain.

“I, uh, let me check...” Zeller said as he started to search.

“Irvine,” Jack called out, making Will flinch as he added it to the list, “why, Will? What are you getting at?”

He added it to the list and felt his mouth go dry. Could be coincidence, he tried to tell himself. It was a lousy lie. Underneath the names he scrawled *G-R to L-A*. Can’t be, can it? It’s too fucking obvious, but it makes no fucking sense, he thought to himself. By the time they arrived at St. Mary’s Park Will was jumpy and fraught.

The police waved them in through a throng of onlookers. The park itself was well kept and underwhelming, trimmed grass and ornamental trees. A strange place to dump a body. As Jack parked near a small fountain Will saw what they’d come for. He got out and walked towards the fountain, ringed by a small stone wall topped with black, spiked railings. There, impaled onto the mottled, blackened wrought iron stem of the fountain’s mouth through their back and up through their abdomen, their arms and legs dangling like a broken doll, was a female corpse. Will watched as the three CSI members that had arrived ahead of them moved around litigiously, collecting samples, taking photographs, processing logically. Everything made sense except one, glaring, inescapable fact.

Will thought he could feel his world shrinking down and down and down, *the case that had been so random and unpredictable now becoming gruesomely patterned.* No matter how long he stared, no matter how long he tried to convince himself he must be wrong about everything that was happening, the inverted face that stared up at him through sightless eyes was one he knew.

Louise Hobbs looked more tortured in life than he saw her now in death.

“Oh god,” he managed to breathe out, closing his eyes tightly as the grief sank through him like a stone.

“Graham,” he could hear Jack call, “get kitted up before you go in.”

Will nodded slowly as if his movements were rehearsed, returning to the SUV to slip into his Tyvek, limbs listless. As their team joined the rest of the crew Will reached into the car where he had left his pen and paper, solemnly adding the name *Hobbs* to the list that spoke a thousand words.

Again. He tried again, a little deeper this time. Couldn’t help the hiss of pain that came, but

resented himself for it. When he spoke he was almost amazed at the dullness in his voice, the lack of focus. He could barely hear himself over the barking from outside.

"*Spiorad na foraoise, oscail mo shúile. Lig an veil a tharraingt ar leataobh."*

The blood flowed down his arm and fell in a series of random drips, each a different tone and frequency than the last. They joined their cousins in the circle, but no matter how long he waited, no matter how long he drew out the incantation, nothing ever happened.

"*Biotáillí dorcha…biotáillí…" Will closed his eyes and fought through the wave of dizziness, "dorcha lig don…"*

Nothing ever happened. Casting his eyes around the dingy room, circle upon summoning circle etched into the wooden floorboards, each one a failed attempt, the runes he had drawn onto the walls, the herbs and animal parts he had strung from the ceiling to attract spirits. His house, drawn rust with his own blood, but she would not come. *She never came. Was it his punishment? He wondered if she would ever be that cruel. But then the only other option was unthinkable.*

"*Miriam," he whispered as he fell forwards, catching himself against his hand, dropping the knife which skittered away across the floorboards, "please honey, talk to me. I need you to..."*

He felt his head swim, chin fall to his chest. No energy to stop it. No energy even to weep any more for what he had done. The world was shrinking, shrinking; his vision blurred and then sharpened as he blinked. All he could see were the floorboards, the circle, his arm running red onto it all.

"You want everything? I'll give you everything. I can give it," he murmured, rocking back and forth slowly, desperate words called up from memory, too far gone to regret his decision, "reaper an bháis, tabhair dom, tabhair dom, tabhair dom," beneath his palm the blood pooled and warmed, "tógtha ó mo lámha le mo lámha, filleadh chugam, filleadh chugam, filleadh chugam," he felt the burning then, as the blood hissed and spat, turning black, but the words did not stop and the pain did not stop and the curse fell from his mouth like leaves from a dead branch, crisped and withered, "le haghaidh...ár go deo."

He didn't remember collapsing to the floor, but he remembered the thing, sitting just at the edge of his vision, hand gripping her hair, grin fixed in place, eyes black and shining like obsidian. Would never forget the first time it spoke to him, the vibration in every fibre of his being as his mind dimmed and he passed beyond all thought; it's lips moved and his relief at finding her at last was run through with terrible, terrible fear.

She spoke and it broke him.

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN YOU.

It had been fifteen minutes since he'd pulled into the driveway. Still sitting, still holding the wheel as if he might change his mind and leave. A limbo he couldn't understand how to break. If he never left would everything remain the same, unchanged? If he never left the truck would she never have to know?

That was how he was found, though Will was sure Lecter couldn't know why he wouldn't answer him as he knocked against the driver's side window. Why he wouldn't unlock the door or wind

down the glass. Eventually the man succumbed to his helplessness and took a new tactic. When Lecter rounded the car and tried the passenger door he seemed not so much surprised as interested that it was open. He climbed in like it was an invitation. Will stayed silent, thumbs running over the vinyl of the steering wheel. They stayed that way for longer than Will would later think it was.

"I don't…" when he finally spoke Will was amazed by his voice; to his own ears he could barely recognise himself, "…I don't deal well with this sort of thing. I can't really…rationalise it, I think that's…that might be why."

The man in the passenger seat didn't say anything. Will swallowed and sat back with a long sniff, puffing out his lungs before breathing out in a long, slow breath through rounded lips. Inside this truck, he thought, time could have stopped forever. Just us in here, nothing moving, all frozen in place. Closing his eyes and opening them did nothing.

When he looked to Lecter the man was watching him in his usual calm, assured manner. Will thought about what would happen if he screamed at the man this close, right in his face. Would he crack? Would the truth leak out of his eyes and ears like blood? Was he even real? Will shook his head and tried to reign himself in. When his thoughts spread like this, ran laterally from thought to thought, he knew things were slipping. He was slipping.

"Abigail's…" he gagged on the next word, scrunching his eyes shut, lifting his right hand from the wheel only to slam it back against the vinyl hard, and again, and again, and again; he beat the wheel until his hand began to throb and the car rocked slightly as he threw his weight back and forth. When he ran out of energy Will found that he couldn't scream, couldn't bring himself to say it. Instead the sound that scraped itself from his throat was guttural. The sound of an animal in pain. Leaning forwards he rested his forehead against the wheel and stared at the dull dials on his dashboard.

"Her mother, it was her mother. She's been...she was taken, I mean, *fuck,*" Will closed his eyes and then opened them again, as if trying to wipe his reality from view, "her mother is dead. They killed her."

No reply. Will turned his head and peered at the man to his right. Lecter was watching him, mouth sealed shut. Instead, his reply seemed to be the hand he had extended towards him. Will sat up, swallowing, staring at the hand. The moment passed in which Will felt like hitting the man, slapping him hard across that self-assured face of his. Then the rational part of his brain fought back control. You made him promise, Will reminded himself, promise he would never manipulate you again. Maybe this is just his way of showing it. Eventually he reached out and took it with his right, flinching a little at the pain as Lecter took his hand and held it gently.

"I don't know what to do," he said softly, shaking his head and trying to smile but finding it lost in a grimace, "I don't want to tell her. I can't tell her."

Across the back of his hand, a thumb dragging back and forth. So wonderfully, easily reassuring. Will brought up his left hand and covered his eyes, pressing his fingers against them until he saw stars.

"And I have to finish it today, there's something…we need to do. It's going to be awful and I don't want to do it," he could feel the tears against his fingers, trying to squeeze past, "I don't want to hurt her and then hurt her again and then where does it *stop*?" the last word was lost in a sob, continuing through tears, "I don't want her to hate me."

The hand squeezed reassuringly. Will returned it, even though it hurt to do so.

“For crying out loud, would you just say something?” Will said, finding himself laughing through his sadness as if that would put the world back where it should be.

“As a psychiatrist I have had extensive training in grief counselling,” Lecter’s voice was a balm, and truthfully, at that point Will wouldn’t have cared if the man were bewitching him. He found it stranger still that he trusted the man not to be, “if you would like I can talk to her.”

Will rocked his head back and forth against the headrest, letting his hand fall into his lap, “No. No, I think I should. She’ll know it’s coming from me and she’ll resent me either way. If I do it through a third party it just makes me look like I don’t give a shit.”

“I understand.”

“Thanks,” Will allowed himself to revel in the touch, “I don’t know why you’re helping me. I know we don’t see eye to eye, and I know I’m an awful piece of shit most of the time, but thanks. Fuck,” he managed a smile, “now you’re going to have to train yourself to enjoy my constant appreciation as well as my apologies.”

“I feel it more prudent just to enjoy you as a whole, rather than break you into bite sized morsels,” Lecter returned his smile, “Abigail is a fierce girl, an independent girl, but she wears her heart on her sleeve. She came to you for a reason and I think you know that. I see you in her, as you see her in you. Come inside. I will make you both something to drink and you can do what you need to do.”

“I can’t do it here,” Will shook his head worriedly, “if it goes wrong she could...”

“It won’t,” Lecter said, such that Will thought he might believe it, “you won’t let it.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say,” Will said wryly, frowning.

“Trust goes both ways, Will. You trust me. The least I can do is return it.”

Jack Crawford hated driving into Baltimore almost as much as he hated being ignored by his subordinates. The traffic was offensively bad and his impatient nature always warred with being stuck in accordion traffic jams, speeding up, slowing down, speeding up again. When he finally saw the turn off for Wolf Trap he couldn’t help but exclaim it, as if saying it out loud would make it worth more.

“*About damn time!” he said to himself as he indicated and pulled out sharply, forcing a honk from an oncoming motorist which he ignored blithely.*

He felt justified in his anger, considering he wouldn’t even be out here if it wasn’t for Will Graham. Anger was easier after all. Guilt didn’t suit Jack, never had. He felt it and he discarded it and usually all that was left was a filthy residue of anger. Something Jack liked to misplace onto anyone that got in his way.

Today he was sure Will would get the worst of it, and later Jack would feel guilt seeping back in, but for now the thought of chewing Graham out for making Jack come all the way out to his little

hovel just because the man wouldn't pick up a phone was justified in his mind.

The dogs were the first thing to give him pause. As Jack pulled up the mutts didn't even take any notice of him, all paws scratching at the front door and mouths yapping incessantly. Maybe he's out? Jack tried to justify the bizarre sight, but Will's truck was in the driveway. Maybe he's asleep, Jack tried to tell himself even as his slow walk had turned to a slow run to the door. All of his excuses fell short, considering he knew that Will loved his dogs like most people loved their own children. Would never leave them yammering at the door like this.
The dogs parted for him as if he were the one they had been calling with their clamour.

"*Will?" he shouted, banging on the front door loudly, "Will you in there?"*

The anger turned guilt became panic. Rushing to the window but the curtains were drawn. Crawford would never call himself a strategic man but he knew when to follow his instincts without question. Will's door was strong, solid wood, but luckily the frame didn't hold as well. It took three good running blows and Jack knew he'd have one hell of a bruised arm once this was all over, but at that moment he couldn't have cared less. When the door gave way, splintering in as the lock broke from the frame, Jack couldn't help but cover his mouth and nose as the dogs ran in past him, hurrying through the house.

"*Jesus," was all he could say, staring in horror.*

It looked like a Grimm's fairy tale, something you would read children to terrify them to sleep. Chalk had been used everywhere it could reach, some symbols he recognised, others he'd never even seen before. As he hurried inside he was forced to push away rabbits feet and dried sage and a host of other unknown things hanging in his face. But the worst part wasn't what he didn't recognise, but what he did. The summoning circles, four or five of them only just in the first room, and more everywhere he stepped; those used to contact the dead. And the smell, the smell and the colour everywhere; blood. So much god dammed blood.

Following the dogs brought him where he needed to be. At first he wasn't sure if he could stand it, the thought of it again. Your fault, all your fucking fault, *he couldn't help the thought as it screamed at him. Will was there on the floor, lying prone with his back to him. The thought of touching the man and finding him cold, dead, for a sickening moment it was too much to handle.*

"*Get a hold of yourself," he said sternly, "get a hold of yourself, get a* hold of yourself! *Will? Will for god's sakes can you hear me?"*

Rolling him over was like a confession, his arms a mess of criss-crossed cuts, his skin sallow and clammy, his hair flat and greasy. It seemed unconscionable that he had reached this state, Jack had seen him only two days ago. His clothes were spattered and smeared in red, but Jack ignored it best he could, fingers finding his neck and holding them there desperately.

"*Come on, come on, please," Jack muttered as the dogs pattered around him, whining, upset.*

When he caught the pulse the breath he let out was less a sigh of relief and more a testament to life, "Thank you," he muttered as he fished his phone from his pocket and dialled nine-one-one, "just thank you."

She was dancing in her room, he caught sight of it reflected in the window as he reached the top of

the stairs. Dancing around on the rug as she held clothes still on hangers up to her body and stared forwards, *Will suspected into a mirror.* It was difficult to continue, to bridge that gap between his world and her; *between reality and the fantasy*.

When he reached the open door he curled his right hand into a fist and tried to imagine he could feel Lecter's reassuring grip there. He knocked twice, jerking her from her little world. Startled, she stared at him as if judging whether or not to be annoyed. She seemed to give up on the idea as she threw the dress she was holding onto her bed next to a pile of other clothes still with their tags on.

"You shaved," she smiled slyly.

"Yeah," Will rubbed at his chin absently, "I guess I did."

"Any reason?" when she didn't get an answer she shrugged, "He took me shopping. You've got some well-heeled friends. How long have you known him anyway?"

"Not that long," Will admitted, "but sometimes it feels like longer."

"Yeah, well," she grinned, "could be because he likes you. *Like* likes you, you know. It's weird, but I guess it's kinda hot. He's cute, right? For an older guy I mean," she was babbling openly.

Will could barely bring himself to look at her easy happiness. *All he could see was Louise Hobbs' face, frozen in death, her open throat like a split peach showing the grizzly stone of her oesophagus.* When he tuned back in she was saying his name. He blinked and breathed in, pulling his arms up around his abdomen.

"Are you ok?" she asked genuinely.

"No," Will couldn't lie to her, "but I don't want you to worry about it."

"...Has there been another?"

"Yes."

"Fuck," she said candidly.

"*Abigail*," he said without thinking.

"What? I'm allowed to swear about it, it's horrible."

"I...ok. I know. Look, I need you to get ready."

"What for?"

"The third trial," he said, hating each word.

"But..." she looked confused, then excited, "how? When did I pass the second one?"

"In the forest," he told her, "you chose to stay on the path rather than abandon it in favour of your parents. Faith and acceptance. You're ready."

"You're sure?" she was smiling in amazement, "Oh my god. This is wild!"

“Please can you just get ready?” he asked tersely, “We need to do this now."

“Why?” she asked carefully.

“It’s a trinity. One trial every day for three days, that's how it works. Look, it’s not important why, it’s just important that we do, or the consequences will be worse than the trial itself.”

“Ok, ok, yeesh,” she rolled her eyes and it made his chest ache, “what do I need to do?”

Her skin as a canvass, Will wasn’t willing to make her remove all of her clothes. They managed to work around it, tucking her clothes up into her underwear to give him as much access as they could without making it uncomfortable in more ways than one. Lecter had allowed them use of the living room. As she closed the curtains, blocking out the winter sun, Will moved the couches back as far as they could go and pulled the coffee table back against the wall.

She lay down on her back on the rug like a supplicant. Opening the bag he had brought from his barn Will set about marking the boundaries, *salt in a circle around them both for protection, a lump of unrefined iron as the southern marker by her feet, steel at the north by her head. Will asked her to put both her hands out to either side, palms up. In her right he placed the antler felt of a young deer of the forest, in her left the bone of a dear dead of old age.* He pulled the tip off of the temporary marker and she closed her eyes as he opened the book, spine so worn and old that it stayed on the page without being held.

“Keep as still as you can,” he said, trying to sound calm, “and remember, you must come and find me. They will try and distract you, but it’s just tricks. Don’t let them pull you away. You’ll need to find me. I’ll be here for you.”

“What are you talking about?” she frowned.

“You’ll…know it when you see it,” he said, trying to have faith in his words, “I need you to be quiet now.”

The process was long and involved. *Copying the symbols as they appeared in the codex, following the natural ley lines in her skin, connecting each point to the next through words and runes written in dark ink. At her forehead he drew the alchemic symbol for copper, the same as the symbol for women. The line that led to her right wrist ending in a circle with a line extending up to the right,* day. *The line that led to her left wrist ending in a circle with a line extending down to the left,* night. *At her heart he penned a capital V with curling edges,* purify. *At her abdomen around her belly button a capital M and B that shared themselves back to back,* the bath of Mary. *At her left foot a box crossed with a heavy X,* month, *at her right two love hearts that joined at the points, cut through with a line*, hour.

“Tickles,” she muttered as he drew on the soles of her feet, feeling her flinch.

“Quiet,” was all he could reply.

When he glanced at the clock it had been over two hours. His back ached and his legs felt numbed. Her thoughts came to him like calm waters over rock, rippling slowly. *She was cold, but it didn’t seem to matter. She felt heavy, not tired or sleepy, just heavy*. Will stared at her and felt his anxiety reach its peak without his consent. He managed to crawl to the lump of steel at her head, kneeling there.

It will work, he told himself over and over, this is going to work. She is strong, she is capable. She *will not fail*.

“Bandia, Tóg an ceann seo isteach i do airm,” he spoke as he slid on his gloves, breathing deep and regular to keep his rhythm in order, *so as not to panic,* “Lig di a bheith athbheirthe i d’íomhá,” when he placed his hand over her mouth her eyes opened lazily, “Feicfidh sí le súile níos faide ná an veil,” when he put his hand over her nose and held it closed they opened further, wide enough that it seemed as if they screamed at him, “Fillfidh sí ar ais chugainn mar dhuine den Augur.”

She couldn’t move, he knew she couldn’t. It was good, he told himself as he felt her struggle as much as she was able, it meant the spell had taken. This was good, he told himself again and again as she let out muffled pleas, trying to cry out for help, wailing as she began to run out of air. He held tight and true, wishing he could close his own eyes as hers began to glaze over, her body began to still. *Deep breath in, deep breath out*. Will could feel the hysteria threatening to consume him, hovering above him like a vulture, waiting for him to show weakness. There is no room for error, he thought again and again, not for her. You need to be strong for her.

Lifting his hands away from her face, Will knew she was gone. His hands shook as he stripped the gloves quickly and touched her skin. Nothing. *Deep breath in, deep breath out*. Reaching forwards he placed his left palm over the symbol at her naval, feeling the flesh depress as he pushed against her. Closing his eyes, he held up his right hand and waited.

“Please, please, please,” he whispered over and over again, “please, please, please. *Find me*.”

She sat up with a start, gasping..

“*Abigail! Goodness girl you gave me a fright!”*

“*Mama,” she blinked, finding her there, sunlight in her blonde hair and a smile on her lips.*

It was wonderful to fall into her embrace. When she looked down she found she was in her bed, in her room. Her drawings on the walls. Her dresser with the blue wood stain she’d done with her dad, her wardrobe with the chip out of the door. Everything was there, so familiar, but her skin felt cold, icy. Her feet felt numbed, “I don’t feel well.”

“*Oh dear, my sweet little thing. You should stay in bed if you’re still not well,” her mother pulled back, reaching up to put a lock of hair behind Abigail’s ear, smiling, “can’t have you feeling bad for you dad getting home. He’s looking forward to seeing you.”*

“*Dad?” she frowned, “Where is he?”*

“He’s at work hun,” her mother said as if it were obvious, “now you rest here, ok?” she reached up to help her lie back, tucking her in, “You’ll be just fine here with us.”

And it was. It was just fine. So soft and warm, and she felt so cold and still. *She watched her mother stand up and leave the room, closing the door behind her with a smile.* Home, home, home . *It felt so wonderful to be home.*

Didn’t it?

Wonderful to be home.

Abigail felt a niggle, something at the back of her neck, twitching.

Wonderful to be home?

The niggle became an itch, scratching and irritating.

Since when had it been wonderful to be home?

The itch became a burn, enough for her to sit up, trying to wipe it away, feeling panicked, confused.

Why did I run away if it's wonderful to be home?

Please, please, please, please*...the words came from nowhere, whispered as if just behind her ear. Her panic only heightened. It was a struggle to get out of bed, her feet sluggish and slow as she headed for the door. Leaden. Everything looked so perfect, just as she remembered. Her photos around her mirror, stuck with blutack. Her rosettes on her cork-board in reds and blues. Each thing she noticed seemed to detract her attention from the thing she'd been heading towards. What was it again? She thought, brain fogged.*

The door! Right, the door. It was there, right there in front of her. Her hand found it difficult to wrap around the handle but after a few goes she managed it. The door swung outwards and she stumbled with it, hands against the wall of the corridor. She dragged herself along, as if she were climbing instead of walking. Everything looked so perfect, enough that it went too far back into being bizarre, off somehow.

The kitchen looked lit by Summer, all sunshine and pitchers of home made lemonade on the counter, motes of dust floating through the air. Her mother was humming to herself as she did the dishes from a lunch laid out on the table, sandwiches and corn muffins and coleslaw and sponge cakes.

"*What are you doing up?" she was asked as her mother hurried towards her.*

"*I was hungry," Abigail answered, suddenly finding herself at the table.*

"*Well there's plenty to go around," her mother smiled, "help yourself. Your father will be here any minute."*

And it was good. So delicious. She felt as if she hadn't eaten in days, everything tasted so divine. With every mouthful she felt as if she were filling a hole in herself. The beef in the sandwiches was succulent and savoury. The cakes were soft and sweet. Before she knew it she had eaten half of everything that was there.

"*Oh my gosh, I'm sorry mom," she was giggling, the feeling coming back into her feet, her skin warming, "I was so hungry."*

"*That's ok sweetie, I can make more."*

"*Never thought I would be such a-* oh my god! What is that!"

And there, in the corner, was a woman. At least she thought it was a woman. She was pale, pale as death, her blonde hair caked in dirt and blood. She was grinning, a horrible distorted grin. And

even beneath her jacket Abigail could tell she only had one arm, could only see one hand, could see the emptiness in her other sleeve. Her mouth was moving, over and over and over.

Please, please, please, please, please.

Abigail kept her hands over her mouth, horrified.

"*What is it honey?" her mother was asking, "I don't see anything there."*

"*You can't see it?" Abigail looked to her mother, "It's right there..!"*

And on looking back it was gone. Nothing in the corner but sunshine and a small end table holding a potted fern. But the horror remained, like a smudging stain. Abigail took a gulping breath and stood up. You were going somewhere? Weren't you going somewhere? She turned and headed for the front door, unsure why she was trying to leave, but unsure why she would want to stay.

Then the door opened wide and in walked her father, carrying a braces of rabbits in his left hand, dangling like Christmas ornaments. He smiled at her as he thumped them down on the counter. The world seemed to light up like a set of string lights, sparkling, pushing all the shadows away.

"*Abby, you feeling better?"*

"*Dad!" she smiled, running into his arms.*

"*I know you wanted to come hunting with me, but I don't like to see you ill. I'll take you next time, ok?"*

"Ok dad, I'll be good, I promise."

"*I know you will," her dad smiled down at her, "you're my good girl. Well my, my look at all this? Louise, you've outdone yourself. Come on, let's get something to eat..."*

It was simple to take his hand, let him lead her back to the table. Was so easy to feel the warmth of the room envelop her, to feel the love and acceptance of her father as he smiled, placing his hand on her shoulder. Everything she had ever wanted, needed, deserved.

Would have been so simple, if she hadn't felt the pull. The need. The want to look back at the open door behind her.

There, with the white glare of the sun obscuring everything, only one thing showed.

The hand, outstretched. Fingers curling slightly. And the words, over and over and over; please, please, please, please.

"*Don't touch it," came her mother's voice, worried.*

Abigail looked to her, frowning. Her father looked angry. She felt panic creeping up her spine.

"*I won't," she said quickly, "I promise!" but her feet were pulling her closer.*

"*Why can't you just do as you are told?" her father bit out through gritted teeth, "you inconsiderate girl!"*

"*I wont, I swear, I won't!" she pleaded.*

"*All just words," her father said, quiet with anger as he stood up to remove his belt.*

"*No, daddy, please!" she begged, "Please I promise!"*

"*Don't touch it!" her mother said, louder.*

"*I won't, I won't, I promise, please, please, please!"*

Please, please, please, please…

And the first lash caught her across the arm. She shrieked, curling away, tears in her eyes.

"*You'll obey and you'll honour this family," her father said with a righteousness she'd been born to obey, "or you'll understand the consequences."*

The next she felt across her back, raising welts and scratches.

"*Mama, mama please," she was crying, "please help me!"*

"*Don't...touch..i-ghh," the words dissolved to a horrible gurgle.*

And when she looked up she could do nothing but stare in horror. Her mother was there, but she was pale, skin clammy, her eyes nothing but milky opalescence, and there, at her throat, a slit wide enough to open and close with each word, sending churns of blood out down her neck, soaking her clothes. And in that moment she knew it was true, she knew her mother was dead. She knew it just as she now knew the lie of the room, the lie of the sunlight and the lie of this place. Her father had never beaten her, had never laid a finger on her. And her mother loved her, she always had.

Her father raised the belt again and Abigail felt the hopelessness she had always felt, the ties holding her to this place, the need to try and try and try to make it work. Each one was being cut, slowly but surely, as she turned and ran, hand outstretched even as she felt arms and hands grasping at her hair, her clothes.

The hand reached for her and she reached back, feeling the chill in her fingers as they touched.

For him it was a mere minute and a half. He wasn't sure how long it had been for her. In truth, at that moment, he couldn't think about the minutia. *She passed through him like water, flowing back to the source.* All he could see was her alive, her struggling to sit up, gasping in breath after breath as if each one was her first.

"Thank you," he said to no one, "*thank you*. Abigail? Abigail, it's alright," he tried to calm her as she heaved in lungfuls of air, "you're ok. Just breathe, nice and slow."

When he reached out with a glass of water she lashed at him, knocking it from his grip. It flew against a couch and then fell to the floor, shattering. Will retreated, stung, but couldn't blame her for anything that she did. Couldn't imagine even trying. When she looked up at him her eyes went wide and she clamped her hands over her mouth, pointing at him.

"What is it?" she asked, panicked, "*What is she?"*

“What are you talking about?” Will looked down at himself, over his shoulder, seeing nothing.

“Is she a demon like you?” she asked hysterically, “Are you both here to take me to hell? You killed me, I died and I went to heaven, only it wasn’t and they tormented me and I could feel everything,” when she looked down at her arm she balked on finding a mark there, *what looked like a lashing from something;* she felt up her back, twisting her arm, and then let out a coughing sob, *“*it was *real*. Oh god, oh please, all the wrongs I’ve ever done, everything is weighing down on me. I was in hell! I left my family, I left them for...for *this*. I’m damned,” she pulled at her clothes and tears fell without sound, “aren’t I.”

“You’re not damned Abigail, I promise you. I *promise* you. I’m not going to lie and tell you it’s not scary, but I promise you’ll feel better soon and...” he ran out of the ability to make the situation better, unsure what to say, “you’ve been reborn. You’re purity knows no equal. You’re not going to hell.”

“Shut up!” she yelled, her eyes regaining their sharpness, darting about the room, “I saw my mom, she was *dead!* She was dead and she was calling me, oh my god, *oh my god!* You bastard, did you know!? Her throat…she was covered in blood, oh fuck, *oh fuck i*s she *dead*?” she was crying now, shouting at him hysterically, her breaths coming in tortured wheezes; when Will nodded jerkily, unable to voice it, she screamed at him, over and over, *visceral, formless screaming that spoke more than words could, tearing at her hair like a moirologia*.

“You’re the worst person, you should be *ashamed* of what you are! What you’ve done to me! Y-you are a liar! *No*, don’t touch me!” she recoiled when he sat forwards, struggling to her feet, “Don’t ever come near me again!”

There was nothing he could do but watch her rush from the room. Nothing he could do but feel the pain, let it be a part of him, *absorb it like a wasp sting, every word, feel the poison drip down, spread out*.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered to no one, “I’m really sorry.”

A sound from the doorway to his left had his nerves dancing. His eyes darted to it, finding a silhouette there. Blinking made it clear, though in truth he wasn’t sure why he was so jumpy. It should have been obvious who he would find.

“Things have not gone to plan?” Lecter asked, standing poised like a statue.

“She…” Will found the words stuck in his throat, *nothing did it justice*, “it’s never simple, it’s never pleasant,” he felt tears running down his face and knew whose hurt and pain it was that he channelled, “can you just, please she’s going to try and run. She’ll leave and she can’t. Please,” he begged, uncaring of pride or logic, “*please* don’t let her. It isn’t safe. Please, if there’s ever anything you would do for me without question, let it be this.”

When Lecter nodded Will felt the hairs on his arms, at his neck, *all over his body* stand on end, like a wave of cold across his skin. He knew what he was asking for, and he knew what the man would do. *Why*, he asked himself. Why would you ask it; because you know what might happen if she leaves now. Why does he make you feel this way? Why do you trust him?

He didn’t have an answer. Will looked to the shards of glass, catching what little light escaped from behind the heavy curtains, splitting it into a myriad of colours. Do you even want an answer? He

asked himself solemnly. You always need to know everything, and look what it gets you. Nothing but ruin. Nothing but pain. Nothing but loneliness.

He set about picking up the large shards from the floor, careful of the sharp edges.

When he found her she was trying to open one of the small windows on the upper floor, above the portico. Quickly dressed in jeans and a hoodie, beneath what looked like Will's own heavy jacket, the rest of the clothes he had bought her stuffed in the duffel bag slung across her shoulder, the marks on her skin were still visible at her hands and ankles where she had forgone socks clearly in favour of just stuffing her feet into her new sand shoes. He stood for a moment, watching her struggle with the old locks.

"I doubt they open," he spoke, causing her to whirl around and glare, "though I admit I haven't tried recently."

Her face was a twisting panoply of anger and dark, intersecting lines and symbols. He did not react farther than a slow blink.

"Keep away from me," she warned; at that he couldn't help but smile.

"Is that a threat?"

"I'm dangerous," she said, "I'm more dangerous than I look!"

"Oh?" Hannibal raised his brows, reaching into his jacket, "I see."

"I told you to back the fuck off!" she screamed, shaking, retreating.

"You will need money," Lecter said, pulling out his wallet casually, "if you plan to run out onto the streets and fend for yourself."

Abigail stopped short, duffel bag clutched in her hands, and turned, eyes streaming but face set. She watched him hesitantly as he opened the leather and began thumbing out note after note. Once he was done, a fair stack of notes in his hand, he offered it to her. When she continued to stare at him doubtfully, hesitant, he extended his arm further and tipped his head slightly.

"You won't get far without it."

"Why are you helping me?" she asked, tone flat.

"Why are you running?" he asked, tone soft and curious.

"Because I'm done being used by people," she spat, eyes blinking, a frown at her forehead as if she didn't know why she'd spurted out the truth.

"Then this should help, shouldn't it?" he said, nodding to the bills in his hand.

It was pleasant, at this crucial moment, that she was such a predictable creature. When she lunged forwards to grab the money he let her, only to take her hand with his own, closing over her hand fisted with money with his own two hands, capturing her eyes.

“I wish you well, Abigail Hobbs,” he said softly, “we will miss you.”

“Miss me? Why would either of *you* miss me,” she hissed, though she didn’t seem to notice that she wasn’t fighting him.

“Because Will loves you like the daughter he can never have,” he said truthfully, “and I love him in a way you will never understand.”

Her eyes were glassy, cracked with bloodshot lines. She watched him dutifully as he rubbed at the skin of her hand gently, over and over. Hannibal smiled at her, even as she broke down, dropping her duffel bag to the ground with a thump. When she ran into his arms, weeping softly, muttering words against his chest that he couldn’t quite make out, he held her like an offering. The money fell to the ground between them like withered rose petals while Hannibal offered sweet nonsense to calm her nerves, *‘it is alright to cry, it is good to let it out. Everything will be alright now, everything will be fine, we will look after you,’* while stroking her long, dark hair.

It was simple to put his hand into the deep pocket of her jacket, finding a small flip note pad there, mainly empty of pages. Never one to miss an opportunity, he took his chance now. *Will kept all of his belongings in his room, and he wasn’t willing to risk snooping in case the man had wards set up that he wasn’t able to detect.* Not worth ruining all of his good work so far, but now, presented with an easy fix, Hannibal was quick to take it.

He held the pad up to his eye level behind Abigail’s head while he continued to console her, finding a scrawled note on the first page. A list of names, some of which he recognised, some of which he did not; they were not of any interest to him. The last note, however.

G-R to L-A .

Hannibal couldn’t help but smile. *Oh so wonderfully clever,* he thought to himself as he slipped the notepad back into the pocket, *such wondrous ways your mind views the world, my darling.*

It took a few more minutes, but he waited patiently. At the bottom of the stairs Hannibal watched him walk into view, creeping carefully so as not to make a sound. Cautious, flighty, intuitive, more so than the girl he held in his arms. Will Graham stared up at them both with eyes clouded by relief. When he nodded to Hannibal in a thanks that it didn’t seem possible for him to express in words, Hannibal nodded in return.

He should stop checking, he knew he should, but it was difficult to believe. Standing at her door, cracked open only by a slit, he stared at what he could see of Abigail’s face beneath the covers. Sleeping so soundly that it amazed him. It was the third time he’d done so that night, and every time he had braced himself to find the bed empty. Letting out a soft sigh Will closed the door gently, resting his head against it.

He couldn’t wait to tell Hannah the good news, to redeem himself. Not that she had ever expected him to, asked him to, but he knew it was a bone of contention between them. The last time he had tried to complete their coven it had gone so horribly wrong. Now he was whole, now he had completed the circle, and Abigail was safe. Things were...getting better, he told himself. He felt capable, he felt, dare he say it, optimistic about the future. This time he would stop this vicious cycle of murder, he would make things right, he would *avenge* her.

When he turned back towards the landing he thought he might have seen her in the corner of his eye, *a fleeting spectre in the dark.* Instead, when he looked closely, it was nothing but a door left ajar. Will frowned, pausing as he returned to his room. Had that door always been open? He hadn't noticed it the other two times he'd been up to obsessively check on his new apprentice. The slim view into the room beyond was intriguing, even to his sleep addled mind. Drew him closer and closer, until he was pushing the door open.

At first he was sure the man was asleep, lying still and prone on his back, the covers drawn up to his neck. Will didn't really remember stepping inside, but he knew he couldn't blame anyone but himself as he closed the door behind him. Walking forwards slowly, across the shadowed rug beneath his bare feet, he could feel his heart beating in his chest. What are you *doing?* he asked himself madly. What the hell do you think you're doing?

His feet stopped at the edge of the bed, *stopped stock still* . Staring down at the man on the opposite side, mostly obscured by the gloom, only a vague outline of nose and cheekbones. What do you see? Will thought to himself, his skin prickling, but not with chill. An abstruseness verging on disturbing, but a quality so soothing and regal that it wiped away his doubts and his fears. Enough to make him doubtful all over again.

When Hannibal reached an arm out beneath the covers, pulling them back on Will's side of the bed, Will started badly but didn't run. He thought he could see eyes opening, a slight catch of light against the dark.

"I'm not...I didn't mean to…" he muttered out.

There was no reply. Will grit his teeth and shook his head, hating that he had to give the man credit. *You're the one standing over him as he fucking sleeps,* he reminded himself dryly, *and he's honourable enough not to seduce you into his bed.* You've done all of that work for him, it seems. Will found himself stuck fast, hands wrapped around his abdomen, holding himself close. Lecter did not speak, but Will could feel his eyes watching him. *Like hands against his skin.*

When he slipped into the bed there was no stopping it, he knew that now. No more lying to himself about what he was and wasn't allowed, about principals he held himself to for no reason other than he had been sure there would be no opportunity to break them.

You at least deserve to find someone that can make you happy ; he thought he could hear the words as if whispered against his ear, the memory of her voice making his will weaken. Lecter didn't stop him as Will curled against his side, face against the man's chest, *warm skin against warm skin,* just pulled the duvet up around Will's body before laying his arm around his back, holding him gently. It was surreal somehow, like he thought he might have to wake up at any moment. With every breath Lecter took Will felt his face rise marginally, then fall. There was a pause, then a feeling of Lecter moving his head to the side, and his chest rose high as he pulled in a long, deep breath; letting it out tickled through his curls, against his scalp.

It took a few seconds to comprehend, but Will was sure it wasn't how he had expected this to go. And how did you? He asked himself even as he opened his mouth to ask,

"Did you just...*smell* me?" utterly unimpressed.

"Difficult to avoid, actually," Hannibal's voice resonated through his chest and his eardrum, causing an odd disconnect that made Will question who was asking who why they were really

there, “I really must introduce you to a finer aftershave. That smells like something with a ship on the bottle.”

His laugh wasn’t a laugh in the truest sense, more a way to let the frenzy leave his body without making the scene that his nerves wanted him to*, push away, run, stop this before it went any further because without his solitude Will didn’t know what the next step was.* Everything was unknown territory from here on out. It didn’t take as long as he’d expected it would to make the decision.

“Blame Alana. I keep getting it for Christmas,” Will admitted, his left hand slipping out across *skin run through with hair beneath his palm;* Lecter didn’t protest his exploration.

“I will need to impose a moratorium in relation to gift giving.”

As a hand appeared in his hair Will felt his breathing even out, his muscles relax. Closing his eyes didn’t numb the feelings, it seemed to make each touch, each connection of skin against skin *more* somehow. Beneath his palm he thought he felt a heartbeat that was not his own, lulling him to a sleep from which he would awake having not remembered the dreams it brought.

Chapter End Notes

"Spiorad na foraoise, oscail mo shúile. Lig an veil a tharraingt ar leataobh. Biotáillí dorcha...biotáillí...dorcha lig don"
'Spirit of the the forest, open my eyes. Let the veil be drawn aside. Dark spirits...spirits...let this one'

"reaper an bháis, tabhair dom, tabhair dom, tabhair dom
tógtha ó mo lámha le mo lámha, filleadh chugam, filleadh chugam, filleadh chugam
le haghaidh ár go deo"
'reaper of death, give to me, give to me, give to me
taken from my hands by my hands, return to me, return to me, return to me
for our forever'

"Bandia, Tóg an ceann seo isteach i do airm. Lig di a bheith athbheirthe i d’íomhá"
'Goddess, Take this one into your arms. Let her be reborn in your image'

"Feicfidh sí le súile níos faide ná an veil. Fillfidh sí ar ais chugainn mar dhuine den Augur"
'She will see with eyes beyond the veil. She will return to us as a being of the Augur'

Rusted Lock

Chapter Notes

> Just wanted to say a quick thank you to everyone who has reviewed or left Kudos, it's been super encouraging to get support for this story during the short hiatus on posting. Apologies for the dealy in this chapter, it's been a busy few months! Enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Like crisp, new snow.

He did not dream.

Feet treading, leaving temporary marks.

So very long since he had.

Shifting, one into the other, seamless.

That was how he thought of it. So long now since he had considered the act of dreaming, having no control.

Practice made perfect.

His velvet darkness, a palace beyond all knowledge. It was soft, smooth, but rumpled up beneath eager fingers as he gripped and pulled away the veil, giving way to a playground of wants and desires and secrets. He wrapped it around himself, swaddling-like, holding him encased and safe as his mind wandered along pathways above human understanding, opening doors into the lives of those around him. Slinking between, *those sleeping brains trying desperately to unpack the day's events while their bodies lay like mortician's meat upon their slabs*, tiptoeing through, *enemy camps like a shadow on the wall, watching, whispering, waiting.*

It had been years beyond count now since he'd first realised that when he fell asleep he visited a place unique from all others. A skill that had come naturally rather than taught, complimenting his agile mind and, as Will had so delightfully put it, his silver tongue. As a wartime orphan his needs outweighed morality, and as needs grew so morality lessened; enough that it became questionable that it had ever existed. People were such banal creatures, he discovered, so easily led like donkeys following an elusive carrot over a cliff. *All it took was murmuring softly, lips against the cocoon*, *and then the patience to wait and see what came out when the skin peeled away.*

His aunt and uncle had been his first great success, so long ago now, such a chasm of time between them. *She had taught him origami, he remembered her hands were lily white and her hair jet black. His uncle had been meek but kind, stately but ineffectual.* One couple in a line of many; they were the closest to what he might have called a family. *Like the remnants of the fire after burning, embers now being fanned into tiny, wavering flames by the man in his bed and the girl he had*

brought with him. Their little family of orphans was growing, and Abigail was one parent away from slotting into place. There was a poetry to that which he couldn't yet explain, and perhaps was not yet meant to.

Time ran forwards, ever forwards. For him, time was elastic, stretched out thin and pliable. In his palace of the mind he could visit any moment he pleased. For now, however, it seemed prudent to stay in the present.

Now, here, the thoughts of the girl were strong, invasive, lingering like the smell of the jasmine flowers his aunt had grown beneath her bedroom window. It was why he knew he would go to her first, and why he knew he'd find exactly what he expected. *The doorway opened onto an average driveway that led to an average house which led to an average family unit seated around a table.* Abigail was dreaming of her far-away-home as if it could bring the solace she needed. Mother, father and daughter bathed in the rosy glow of nostalgia and necessity, tinged blue by loss and grief. Her raw emotion drew those around her with disgusting regularity, like flies on excrement. She would be a simple but unpredictable tool, *something of a jigsaw piece with the sides peeling.* That was what he told himself.

When it was time to move on he felt the tingle of excitement fizzing in his spine. Something he had come to anticipate, look forward to at the end of each day. *Stepping into the mind of a man whose very existence he was still coming to terms with.* And yet on stepping out of one realm into the other he had expected *grass and trees and the furore of the forest*. Instead there was familiarity, enough that it amazed him as to its intricacy and attention to detail.

Peering in through a door left ajar before him, Will Graham had been able to recreate Hannibal's own kitchen down to the layout of his furniture, the patten of his floor tiles and the knots in the wooden counter tops. It was wondrous. Yet as he marvelled at the dreamscape, a sound distracted him from his reverie. *Wailing, like an animal calling out in pain. It drew him like a siren.* Touching the kitchen door made the hinges squeal slightly, enough to give him pause. In reality his hinges did not squeal, *but in Will Graham's mind they did.* An intricately created ward*,* an alarm of his own making. Even asleep, Graham was a formidable opponent.

The sound continued and now, as he pushed inside, it became clear that he had misinterpreted. Not an animal crying in the night. *A child, an infant, wailing.* Hannibal lifted his chin minutely, eyes narrowing. The sound was familiar. The illusion groped at him blindly, desperately; it felt sour and miserable. He wished it didn't affect him so. That it did spoke volumes he was not willing to read.

The man he expected to find was standing in the centre of the room, stock still, facing away towards the far wall. In the gloom it was difficult to make him out, as if he were merely a sheen, catching the light in flickers. *The air was thick and heavy, hot and humid, enough to imagine it beading against his skin.* Stalking closer Hannibal stayed silent, instead reaching out with careful fingers. Graham was a subtle smudge against the dim background, but Hannibal liked to think he could see him as clearly as others refused to. *A mirror image, twisting as the looking glass warped.* His hand came closer and closer, until he was sure he could feel the cloth against the pads of his fingertips.

Only his hand never made contact. As he neared, Will's skin seemed to flicker, a familiar buzzing flutter of wings accompanying the action. Hannibal stalled, watching intently as he tried once more. This time he could see it, *as if it were day.* Wings. Large, dark wings encasing the man before him, shrouding him from sight. A thin, impenetrable layer of moths, flocked across Will's being like

velvet; every time Hannibal tried to draw near they would flicker like bees in a hive, dancing so as to confuse the predators that came for the sweet honey treat inside.

A memory, so intrinsic to them both that it sat deep, dark and hidden behind veil upon veil of distractions made to keep the mind blind to a trauma from which it could not recover .

Circling the man allowed Hannibal time to wonder if Will knew where his dreams led him, their significance, or if it was merely a haunting. A projection of memories lost to the conscious mind. As they came face to face the wailing grew to an intensity most would not be able to bear. He bore it like a penance. He bore it like an expectant parent. He bore it.

He was faced with eyes white as marble, mouth gaping as the sound grew and grew; it was not Will as he knew him. It was simple to reach up and dismiss the Creature with a heavy backhand that never connected, *the moths scattered in an explosive flurry of bat like wings, a living cloud of smoke.* And in its place the baby…

There was no time to see it, never mind avoid the attack. What he saw of the infant was its open mouth, screaming, its small arms huddled against its skin, and the small felted nubs barely protruding. He felt as if it were the space of a single breath in, watching the child be revealed, before he heard the sound of hooves and the force hit. Charging out of the flurry of moths the proud rack of antlers speared his arms, his chest, his face, crashing him into the wall. *And there, in the micro moments before waking, he had time to feel complete and utter surprise.*

The great black stag pawed the ground and let out a rumbling snort.

Startling sunlight in his eyes, forcing them to a squint. Blinking didn't help, instead showing him only his own hand reaching out before his eyes towards the ceiling. *It had been some time since he had encountered such lucid defences, though he doubted Will was aware of them.* He let his hand fall and cleared his throat as he adjusted to the waking world. *Allowing his body to understand that there was no trauma to his flesh, no bone piercing his skin.* Everything was calm and quiet as he turned his head...only then realising with a frown that something was missing. Something that made less and less sense the more awake he became. *No weight against his chest, no skin beneath his hand as he reached out across the bed.*

Will was gone. Donning his robe Hannibal walked to the room opposite his on the landing and pushed open the door; *no one, bed untouched.* Staring at it didn't seem to help his predicament, as his mind continued to wonder; *how?* Sounds from downstairs caught his attention, sharp and clanging. A hint of voices. Working his way down allowed a small amount of time to try and collect his thoughts before he was faced with a truth he wasn't sure how to explain.

The kitchen was warm and humming, a savoury sweet scent perfuming the air. Upon his butcher's block perched Abigail, hunched over like a gargoyle with her phone in her hands, staring at it avidly. At his oven stood Will, opening the door to pull out what appeared to be a surprisingly well risen Dutch baby in his favourite cast iron pan.

And he was delightfully, amazingly, tantalisingly *awake.*

"Hope you don't mind," Will said, unable to sound entirely contrite, "it was getting pretty late and I have to go in again soon. Thought I'd put myself to work in the kitchen."

“Not at all,” Hannibal, standing in the doorway looking only half awake appeared perplexed enough to make Will wonder if the man had ever walked into his kitchen to find someone else making him breakfast; blinking as Will put the pan down on a cork mat he continued as if by rote, “Abigail, would you set the table please.”

When the girl didn’t even acknowledge that anyone had spoken Will wished he had the confidence to call her out. Wished he wasn’t so close to the problem that he was sure he would only make it worse. Thankfully, Lecter didn’t seem to have that issue.

“Young lady,” he said with just the piquant amount of sternness; her eyes looked up from under the dark fall of hair, holding the man’s stare before looking away as she slumped down to the floor and began raking through cupboards, “third from the left, on the middle shelf. And cutlery, in the drawer beneath the toaster.”

Will stayed quiet as Abigail moved around behind him. Once she was gone with a rattle of forks and a clink of plates he would admit he felt a relief that showed in his slumping shoulders, a deep inhale with eyes closed, a long exhale. It didn’t help that he’d woken with a raging headache that was continuing to plague him. Opening his eyes he knew that Lecter was watching him, even if he’d moved out of sight to a low cupboard behind the tall fridge. *A weird sense of hyper-awareness he always had around the man.*

“Do you have any icing sugar?” Will asked as a distraction from the misery bouncing around his head like a hot marble.

As Hannibal emerged from the cupboard already holding a mason jar of white powder, Will felt like a kid again. *Cooking with Matron Hannah, marvelling as she moved around the kitchen with purpose and flare, him and his sisters all working in unison like a little colony of bees grating and chopping and frying and tasting and setting tables.* Every meal had been an event in their house, and every move had been anticipated like an unspoken telepathy. It had been the one time Will felt his gift didn’t hinder him but instead merely melted away into the natural rhythm of collaboration.

The thought came with a bittersweet edge; he had tried to phone Hannah that morning but got no reply, which was odd because the old bat always got up early as the dawn. He was sure she’d call back when she saw she’d missed him.

“You have some tricks up your sleeve, Agent Graham,” Lecter said as he handed over the powdered sugar, reaching out to flick the crust with a satisfyingly sharp noise.

“Consultant,” Will corrected him, unable to stop the smile that quirked his lips, “and you don’t get raised as a good southern boy without picking up some cooking skills.”

“So I’m lucky not to be served grillades and grits?”

“Please,” Will smirked, voice taking on a southern lilt that he had spent years training himself not to show, “my Matron is a Louisiana witch. You’re lucky I didn’t serve you pie on the griddle to go with. I’m just going to take it to the table like this.”

“There are strawberries,” Lecter said, gesturing with his hand for Will to go ahead, “I shall fetch them.”

They ate in silence, but not enough to bother him. There was something so surreally domestic about it that Will couldn’t help but soak it in, absorb it like a memory he might cherish later when all of

this inevitably fell apart. A flash frame of a life he'd only heard about in fairy tales.

Abigail left the table first, muttering something under her breath that he couldn't catch, and Will had automatically made to go after her. It was the soft hand upon his that stopped him with a jerk of surprise. Sitting back down slowly Will looked at the gentle touch, then up to Lecter who was staring at the door through which Abigail had fled. On turning his eyes to Will's he removed his hand easily, as if the whole action had been utterly and simply normal. Will wondered if he would ever get used to it.

"She will need time to process her grief," Lecter said as Will blinked rapidly, swallowing, "any contact at this moment will draw serious associative bonds. You must be careful not to tie yourself to anything inconsolable."

"I think it might be a bit late for that," Will said through a tight jaw, wiping his mouth on a napkin and sitting back in his chair, movements twitchy, appetite gone; neither spoke, but Lecter continued to finish his plate. Will watched him with subtle appreciation which he was sure wasn't as subtle as he thought it was. *You should know better than this by now*, he thought to himself. But then Will had built his life around refusing to listen to advice. He wondered when Hannibal might notice that fact, "want any more?"

"Thank you, but I think my waistline would suffer for another portion," Lecter politely declined.

"I don't know, it looked fine last night," Will quipped, stretching his arms above his head.

It was difficult to read Lecter's expressions, *so subtle in its changes that from time to time he missed the miniscule quirks that gave him away* , but this time he caught the glint in the man's eye. *Predatory* . And then gone with a blink. Will found himself pulling his bottom lip into his mouth to run his teeth over the flesh. Fucking hell, he thought as he looked away, sometimes even you buy your own bullshit, don't you.

"I'm flattered."

"You should be," Will said, offhandedly, staring down as he picked at something on the tablecloth.

"How odd," Lecter paused as he wiped at his face with a heavy napkin, "until mere minutes ago I barely noticed the very slight southern lilt to your vowels."

"Not many people do," Will cleared his throat and tried unsuccessfully to keep the wry twist from his voice.

"Now it is all that I can hear. May I ask why you decided to hide your southern upbringing?"

"I don't hide my southern upbringing," Will said pointedly, "I just find that my accent doesn't...fit very well in my position."

"To obvious, you mean?" Lecter asked as he sipped his coffee; Will felt himself bristling slightly and couldn't tell exactly where the reaction had come from.

"What? Because I'm from the south then I'm clearly an unnatural? Didn't think you bought into stereotypes, doctor."

"Only for those that believe in such nonsensical folly," Lecter said, pulling Will's mood back again,

whiplashed in the other direction straight into contrite and appreciative, “ some believe that the accent is a timeline, leading back to our parents.”

“Wouldn’t be like that for us though, would it,” Will needled.

“Not for us,” Lecter inclined his head, “but then if we do not have an origin in our parental tongue, are we linguistic orphans? Do you think that your accent perhaps did not represent you truthfully.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You did not have to.”

“Oh yeah? Then what’s your excuse?” Will bit back, feeling meddled with.

Lecter hesitated for a moment before blinking twice. They stared at each other intently. Will refused to back down, *even as he drowned in the feeling of falling that always seemed to accompany Lecter’s unbroken stares, a sense of timelessness.*

“Heaven forbid I would understand what you mean by that,” Lecter said finally as he picked up Will’s plate and placed it on his own before piling their cutlery atop the stack.

“First I thought you might be Scandinavian, but the phonetic framework doesn’t quite fit,” Will mused, enjoying the ever so subtle hint of danger quivering around Lecter’s form now that he was in the spotlight, *like a shadow wary of the sun*, “there’s a Netherlands lisp in there, right? Along with some weird glottal stops, like Scottish. Finnish, maybe? And French, some of your vowels are definitely French, but there’s more that I can’t quite wrap my head around. Makes me wonder,” Will sipped at his coffee before asking, “where are you from exactly?”

A look that would have cut glass were it not distractedly impressed, Lecter answered plainly but with expert evasion, “Lots of different places.”

“Oh,” Will said facetiously, “I see.”

“Drawback of being an army brat,” Lecter said, closing the subject a little too quickly, “After I was orphaned I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle. We travelled with impunity. My formative years were spent crossing borders, and thus my accent is something of a Frankenstein.”

“Frankenstein was the doctor,” Will said, watching Lecter pointedly, “I think you meant to say his monster.”

“How aptly pedantic of you Will,” Lecter said airily, “I am learning something new of your every hour.”

“Huh,” Will huffed out, *sensing a lie but still unsure of the what and the why*, “I guess neither of us are who we say we are.”

“I suppose not,” Lecter said, once more the polished, untouchable gentleman as he rose with their plates and took them to the counter.

It was as he placed his coffee down upon the table top that he realised it; *not once since he and Lecter had begun their little sparring match after Abigail left the table had Will taken a moment to*

feel guilty or upset about his new charge . Licking his lips, Will wondered if this was yet another preternatural talent that the good doctor possessed...or if it was simply a bi-product of his natural charm . To be fair, he wasn't sure he could truly tell the difference any more. When his phone started ringing in his pocket Will silently thanked it's good timing, *answering gave him no further time to reflect on his own misgivings.*

"Graham," he answered neutrally.

"About time," Jack answered with an entitled, easy anger that made Will's hackles rise, "where the hell are you?"

"Having breakfast like a civilised human being. It's only a quarter past seven."

"I want you in, now. We have an ID on our Jane Doe. Name's Louise Hobbs."

And there it was, the one thing he had been fearing to hear. *Louise Hobbs' death, haunting them still, reaching out to try and clutch at her daughter with spectral fingers.* From here on out things would get tricky. Will cleared his throat and did his best.

"Well that's something at least. Is the coroner done with her?"

There was a pause, one Will didn't appreciate, "Asking for your turn?"

"Yes, I'm asking for my turn," Will replied flatly.

"And I'll reiterate, in case you didn't hear me the first time. I don't want you anywhere near the morgue, understand?"

"Jack…"

"Don't Jack me, I mean it. You and Mrs. Hobbs won't be making each other's acquaintance. You can read the coroner's report and the test results. I want you and Zeller out to her house, track down the seal."

" I had something else I wanted to follow up today," Will argued, thinking of the possibility of a clue Molly Grey-Pelt had unwittingly offered him the day before, *GR-JA*.

"Yeah, well put that shit on the back burner and do what you're told," Jack said easily, "This woman, Hobbs, she has a family. When you find them pass along my condolences."

The bottom of his world was juddering loose, *ready to fall*.

"She had a family?" it was no challenge to sound distressed.

"Husband and daughter. Unregistered."

"She might not be an unnatural," Will said a little too eagerly, biting his tongue.

"Pretty low chance of that. What's it matter anyway? Registry will still want them both in for examination."

"Right," Will sighed, "sure."

“What, no diatribe?” Jack goaded.

“I’m tired, Jack. I have a splitting fucking headache and I’m *tired* , alright?”

“You’re not special. No one takes this job to have a good time. I want you in here within the hour.”

Fumbling with the phone Will hung up quickly, mainly because he knew Jack was leading up to doing it himself for emphasis and he wanted to beat him to the punch. Small victories, but he’d take them where he could get them. When something was put down next to him on the table Will realised he’d been staring into space. He picked up the small pack of ibuprofen, keeping Lecter in his peripheral as the man set about filling the dishwasher.

“Thanks,” he said softly, returning the phone to his pocket.

“I find it’s always useful to keep a stocked pill cabinet,” Lecter said as he put his skillet in the sink, filling it with water to soak, “do you get them often?”

“What headaches? No more than normal,” Will shrugged as he fished the blister pack out, popping two white capsules before tossing them into his mouth and downing the last of his coffee, now lukewarm and dismal, “just woke up with it, that’s all.”

“You slept badly?”

“Actually,” Will let out a soft chuff of air through his nose, “I slept great,” then, as Lecter opened his mouth to continue Will beat him to the punch, “I have...something I need to ask of you.”

Eyes on him; he felt examined. Not that it wasn’t to be expected, *it was the Lecter’s job to watch every movement he made and evaluate his health*, but this was...different. He felt like a bug in a jar. And it was true, *he avoided being near people who sought to analyse him, even as he was drawn to them for their warped sense of mutual understanding;* Lecter’s own admission of it didn’t help. The doubt hung over his head, Damoclean. Jack had never hidden it, with Alana he’d never been sure, but with Lecter…

“They have ID’d Louise Hobbs,” Hannibal said, making Will startle, closing his mouth.

“You knew? Did Jack..?” he asked, frowning as he pushed away from the table, chair scraping the floor unpleasantly, and stood.

“An educated guess. And you are going to ask me to stay quiet about Abigail.”

“Ok now you’re just taking the piss,” Will said sourly, “this isn’t a joke.”

“I am not laughing.”

“On the outside,” Will rebutted, eyes narrowed, “I wouldn’t have thought I’d have to remind you that strangers don’t have expectations of each other.”

“I don’t consider you a stranger…”

“Well you should,” Will butted in, taking a step forwards, his tone cutting, “because that would be only *polite* .”

There had been something vindicating about putting him in his place. Every perfect, intricate, powerful fibre of the man's being seemed to mock Will's own under-confidence, his desire to feel as indestructible as Lecter purported himself to be. And yet, even as he congratulated himself for his conviction, he felt as if he'd gained nothing in return.

Lecter watched him as he got ready to leave, as he searched for his glasses, as he sorted himself quickly in the mirror. It felt deliberate, but in a way he wasn't sure how to quantify. There was a part of him that was almost completely sure that even if he had not confronted Lecter earlier that the man would still have been doing exactly what he now was. *Bug in a jar.*

The door was opening and he was making to step outside into the crisp winter morning when he was stopped by a smooth voice asking the question he had dreaded.

"And if I were to mention Abigail to Jack Crawford?" Lecter sounded utterly calm and composed, as if he were merely putting forward dinner options.

Will turned to look at him, unable to keep his face so serene as the doctor was capable of, "Well then, I can tell by the fact that you'd even ask that you've clearly never pissed off a witch," he said with as much of a venomous barb as he could muster.

And then he was gone, out the back door and down into the garden where he had heard Abigail slip minutes before. Taking a deep breath, he walked out onto the grass, a niggling at the back of his mind that wondered if he would ever be comfortable dealing with Lecter. *No matter how much he wanted to like him, something instinctual always flared up like a warning.* He shook his head and tried his very best to ignore it.

She was sitting in the middle of the grassy lawn, cross legged with her back to him. As he approached she did not flinch, nor did she acknowledge him. Her fall of dark hair stayed still as a beam of light through the clouds, wavering but never breaking.

The thought. The very thought of it made Will's blood stutter in his veins. *Losing her, seeing her taken away to the Registry, or worse the Facility, losing control of keeping her safe from harm* . It hurt. He hadn't been prepared for how much it hurt.

"Abigail," he said softly as he reached her; when she didn't reply he walked around to face her, hunkering down.

Eyes staring down at hands; hands holding a flower-head, a dahlia, red and white petals plucked from Lecter's impressive display. Will licked his lips and felt his eye twitch, rubbing at it with distracted fingers.

"Abigail, I just wanted you to know that…"

"It's dead now," she interrupted, "no matter how much energy I give it."

Will swallowed, "Yeah," he nodded finally, "yeah that's right."

"You can teach me, can't you."

Not even a question, a statement. It would have been easier to ask what she meant, but also damning. *He knew what she was asking, and it made his skin crawl.*

“I’m the one that decides who learns what,” he said sternly, “and right now,” he said pulling a small book from his pocket, “you are going to study this.”

That she took it was helpful, but the empty look she gave *The Almanac of the Adept* wasn’t so much.

“What’s it about?”

“You’ll find out when you read it,” Will countered.

“Will it teach me?” she asked, “How to speak to..?”

“ *No* ,” Will said decisively, “that sort of magic, it’s not for you.”

“But it’s for you, huh?” she said, steely eyed, hurt, “you get to talk to the dead, but I have to stay here, alone forever !”

“We’re all alone, no matter what,” he said, standing, feeling jittery as she continued to watch him, “it doesn’t help, speaking to them. It only keeps the pain fresh.”

“But you can, can’t you? You could find mom,” she said, a pleading lilt to her voice that made Will’s heart sink, “you could ask her what happened, I could speak to her, I could..!”

“ Please, Abigail, I need you to focus on your studies.”

“Fuck you!” she snapped, tears springing to her eyes, “why are you doing this to me?”

“Because this is how things work,” he stated strongly, forcing the hurt and the guilt down, deep down until he could barely feel it stabbing at his heart, “people die, others mourn, and the world goes on without them. Looking back will only lead to torment. Listen to me,” he bent down once more, taking the dahlia head in his fingers, watching it wilt as the magic that was preserving it began to fade, “if this is going to work, I need you to trust me, alright?”

For a moment, a sweet moment, Will thought he had gotten through to her. Made sense to her damaged mind, desperate to find the past and scared to see the future. But the acceptance he thought he’d seen turned out to be nothing but a vicious smile, dark eyes. Will swallowed and bore it as Abigail stared him in the eye and spoke words that told the story of his life from a young age. One of fear and mistrust, ignorance and destruction.

“You know, I said to you not long after we met that a woman in the market had told me there was a witch at Wolf Trap who had a habit of collecting strays? Someone I could trust, that would teach me and help me? Well that’s not true. I was the one, I asked her that, I had heard of you and she...she told me that you were no witch. That there was a necromancer in the Wold Trap woods and that I should stay as far away from you as I could. And now?" she spat out, "I wish I'd listened."

The extensive grounds gave the facility the feel of a manor house, the stately homes facade and well trimmed gardens for the recuperating to wander; with supervision, of course.

Today was Thursday, Jack thought to himself as he wondered up the steps. He liked to think in terms of weekdays, not dates. Weekdays told him what was on the menu at the Baltimore Facility for the Study of Supranatural Criminality . Dates were more damning. Dates told him how long it had been since his first visit. Matthew, one of the ward assistants, nodded to Jack as he headed in to reception.

That he knew almost all the staff by name also pricked at his calm.

The nurse at the front desk of the cavernous entrance hall made up his visitor's badge, her face never deigning to look friendly, not even a small smile had ever graced her lips. The footsteps of people wandering the halls beyond clicked and clacked across stone hallways. The light was bright and jarring on the eyes. The smell was of disinfectant and hopelessness.

He hated this place.

"How's Will today?" Jack asked, more as something to say so their encounter wasn't as awkward as it usually was.

"No significant changes," the nurse said, her blue eyes clinical as she regarded him, "but at least you'll have some company for your visit today. Make things a little easier."

"I'll have..? What do you mean company?" Jack asked with a frown, taken aback.

" Mr. Graham has a visitor today…" she said , looking startled when Jack began hurrying away towards the wards, "Director Verger gave their approval !" she called after him, huffing at his rudeness.

He followed the well worn path through the Facility on rash feet, the weight of culpability heavy on his shoulders. Two months now, two whole, long months since he'd called the ambulance, since he'd met with the FBI Inspector General's Office and the Directorship of the Facility, since he'd picked up the pen and signed Will Graham's life away on a hope, a vain hope, that this could undo all the damage he had allowed to happen.

And now he felt like what little control he thought he had was slipping. Will was falling further and further into the mass of madness that this place confirmed, and Jack was beginning to wonder if the Director wanted to cure Will so much as they wanted to study him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Crawford," Billy, the ward keeper, stepped out of his booth and held up his hand as Jack approached at a trot, "Will already has a visitor. You know the rules, only one at a time ."

"Who the hell *okayed this? I did not...I was not informed..!" Jack sputtered, handing over his gun and his badge; Billy hesitated, "Come on man, get me the talisman and let me in there, or so help me I will have your job!"*

The man's lips thinned and he stood up to his full height, shoulders back, but took Jack's offered items nonetheless. Muttering as he fished out a warding talisman, he handed it over to Jack, speaking through a tight jaw. The small straw doll he was handed was rudimentary and smelled foul; he had never had the inclination to ask why.

“You know how it works, keep that on you at all times. Without it there’s not protection if Mr. Graham decides to…”

“I get it, Billy, now will you..?” Jack butted in.

Only both of their mouths were kicked shut by a sound from down the long corridor; a sound of sliding metal grating, then the tuft of something soft falling to the floor. Frowning, Jack followed Billy as he walked, then jogged, then ran, towards the door Jack wished he wasn’t.

“Miss Bloom!” Billy was shouting, knocking on the door, “Come outside now please, Miss Bloom!”

And there, on the floor, was an identical little wicker doll as Jack had moments ago put into his pocket. The sliding hole in the door used to pass food and items was just closing as he arrived, while Billy fumbled with his keys. Jack was able to push in and look through the dimpled glass of the door while Billy panicked, mumbling about talismans and warding and spells.

But the face that greeted him through that small panel of glass wasn’t panicked, wasn’t worried or hurt. The face was serene, framed by curtains of shoulder length dark hair that set off her porcelain skin, and eyes that seemed to see the humour in their overreaction rather than the danger of her own situation.

“ Please,” her muffled voice said from beyond the door, “I’d rather talk to Will without any barriers. That’s our choice. I’d rather you honoured it.”

And in that moment, as Billy fumbled with the lock and was amazed that it would not open to any of the keys he tried, Jack Crawford felt the polarising grip of both indignant anger and utter relief; anger that someone would dare undermine his authority about treating someone under his care, relief that Will appeared to have attracted the help of someone just as reckless and hard-headed as he was himself.

Someone who Jack hoped beyond hope could make sense of the terror and remorse that was eating the man alive from the inside out.

The house looked just as he’d expected it to: unremarkable. Will tended to find that Unnaturals tried their best not to bring attention to themselves in every aspect of their lives. Their clothing was dull and ordinary, some middle of the road branded shoes, their haircuts, their cars, their domiciles, everything was a smoke screen. And the Hobbs residence was no exception.
Will should know. He did the same thing himself.

The sound of Beverly yanking up the handbrake and unbuckling he seatbelt drew Will from his thoughts in the back seat. He realised he was still holding his cellphone in his hand, *had been trying to call his Matron Hannah since that morning, but still all he got was voicemail.*

He sat for a little while as Katz and Zeller got out of the car and began changing into their Tyvek, *staring at the modest garden now thick with tall weeds, the drawn curtains, the look of disrepair, no car in the driveway.* He got out of the car slowly, as if he could delay the inevitable for as long as possible, and knew that when they knocked on the door…

“No one home,” he muttered staring at the house, accusatory; Zeller looked up with a frown as he clipped closed his kit box.

“Maybe they’re just out,” Beverly shrugged, “their daughter’s missing, right? Probably out trying to find her.”

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it,” Brian asked him seriously.

It had always been difficult. He didn’t make friends, even when he had been younger, *less jaded, less unhappy, less dangerous*. People just didn’t get it, and it had taken a long time to come to terms with that. People just didn’t get him, and that was that. Until Lass, *with her boundless optimism*, until Alana, *with her dogged determinedness,* and now Lecter, *with his like-mindedness.* And here he thought another anomaly might have popped up in his mainly flat landscape; the last sort he’d expected.

“Yeah,” he replied as Beverly looked a little startled, back and forth between himself and Zeller, “I don’t like it.”

“We should go in,” Brian continued without hesitation.

“Break in,” Beverly clarified, unimpressed, “what the hell has gotten into you?”

“He’s right,” Will said quickly.

“Damn straight,” Brian said, giving them no time to argue as he marched up to the door and started expertly jimmying the lock.

They stood together and watched, Will with appreciation for the man’s tenacity, Beverly seemingly flabbergasted by everything that had just occurred.

“Since when are you two so simpatico?” she asked as she hurried to grab her kit, *even though she didn’t approve, she had enough conviction not to pass up the opportunity*.

“Hell if I know,” Will shrugged, walking with her up the path as he kept an eye out for nosey neighbours.

“Well that’s horseshit,” she said wryly, “considering that stunt you pulled the other day, arguing in front of Jack. What the hell is going on, Will?”

“When I find out,” he said softly as Zeller stood up determinedly and pushed open the door, “I’ll let you know.”

Before the man had a chance to enter Will held his arm out, blocking his path. Wordless acknowledgment, as Zeller stepped back. *A strange scent floating in border of the real and the unreal*. The feel of the outside air meeting the inside air leaving a tang on his tongue. It was simple to recite the spell under his breath.

“Nocht do rúin.”

There was a distinct and sudden smell of sulphur, and Will was only just able to shout '*back!'* before the doormat sitting just on the inside of the door, sporting an ironic *welcome* on its beige bristles, burst into flame. Will thought he heard Beverly mutter something foul in fright. Zeller was already running to their car to grab the small fire extinguisher. Will simply smiled grimly as the yellow flames were doused in white smoke and powder, the loud coughing roar of the extinguisher abrasive to his ears. Once everything settled down and the fire was truly dead, Will waved a hand in front of his face to dismiss the floating white debris left behind.

"Well," he said flatly, "I think I'd better go in first."

He received no complaints. Yet, beyond the booby trap at the front door, Will found no further impediments. Nothing scrawled into the walls or floors, nothing pressure sensitive, nothing voice activated, no sense of magic anywhere else. When Will called them in Zeller and Katz were still looking distinctly cautious.

Will looked around, "looks like they only had time for one spell, and it wasn't really much of one anyway."

"I don't know, would've ruined my day," Zeller said facetiously, "you're sure there isn't anything else waiting to fry us?"

"Ninety nine percent."

"I'd rather it was one hundred."

"I always leave one percent," Will shrugged, "if we do get fucked and I said one hundred then I'd never live it down, now would I."

"I'm going to speak to the neighbours, see if they have anything useful," Beverly said, adding with a wry smile, "try not to get yourselves fried now."

All movements from then on were circumspect, Zeller from fear of further harm but for Will it was something different. It was solemn. Just the one spell at the front door, and the more he studied it the more he realised it hadn't been freshly laid; there was a reek of decay to it. Old magic, laid long ago to keep out intruders. He ran his finger over the mantelpiece in the living room, finding significant dust there, matching the filthy floorboards and furniture, the black water in the toilet. The fridge was empty except for a packet of eggs in their container and a bottle of ketchup, both intensely out of date. The beds in both bedrooms were unmade and smelled stale. Abigail's room offered him nothing, bare walls, sparse clothes left hanging in the wardrobe that seemed too small for her lithe frame, a couple of young teen magazines on her night stand that had yellowed with time. The air was thick with dust motes and must. There was no seal to be found.

By the time he met back up with Zeller, Will was grim.

"This place is weird," was the first thing Brian said as he stared at the living room, "I can't really find any traces of the normal stuff people leave behind every day. I mean, it feels more like a tomb than a home."

"That's because no one's lived here in years," Will sighed; Zeller frowned, mouth opening but Will jumped in before he could start, "that trap at the door? It's years old at least. Put it this way, I think

it used to be far more potent than just something to scorch your ankles."

"So, what?" Zeller asked, trying for cocky but coming off unsure, "You saying that they don't live here any more? But this place is registered to Garret Hobbs workplace, his pay-check gets sent here. They're still paying the mortgage for christ's sakes."

"Put it this way, Louise Hobbs wasn't murdered here. There's no seal, there's no blood, there's no evidence of foul play…" the more he explained it, the stranger it became; *was Louise Hobbs even a halfbreed? Why did they display her publicly when all the other kills had been at the victim's homes?*

"Who knows, maybe her hubby did it. Disposing of the body by adding it to someone else's murder spree."

"Weirder things have happened," Will muttered as he stood by a shelf of small, porcelain curios.

Reaching up he brushed the dust from the head of a small cherubic boy holding a lamb; coming here had been a waste of time, but trying to tell Jack that would have been utterly pointless. *The truth was hiding* so*mewhere, just out of sight.* In his jacket pocket, his notebook felt heavy. Will shifted his weight from left foot to right, watching Zeller work out the corner of his eye, "hey Brian, have you ever heard of the Amanuensis?"

"Sure I've heard of them," Zeller said, looking frustrated as he tried to life prints from the fridge door handle and failed; giving up he sat down, looking to Will and sighing, "why?"

"Know much about them?"

"No. No one does really. They're Registry, right? They keep records."

"Yeah, I guess they do," Will said cagily; he flicked his eyes to Brian, trying his best to keep the man's thoughts at bay, "I met one."

"You…" that garnered his attention, "you met one?"

"Yeah. I went to the Registry with Crawford to get details about Milly Grey-Pelt. I met the Aman. She was...interesting."

"I'll bet," Zeller frowned, "...why are you brining this up now?"

"Because I have a crazy fucking theory and I want to talk to someone about it who might just throw it back in my face and tell me I'm nuts," Will admitted frankly, "you know Jack. He doesn't listen to crazy."

It took a minute for Zeller to react, "Why don't you bring this up to Bev?"

"She's too by the book."

"*Really?* And what, I'm not?"

"No, you're not."

There was a terse silence, then eventually Brian cracked the smallest of smiles and leaned forwards in his chair, “Ok,” he said, “shoot.”

Pulling his notebook from his inner jacket pocket, Will flicked to the right page and handed it to Zeller. Leaning against the Hobbs’ family worktop and biting his nails he watched Zeller ingest his mad idea. The silence was heavy, mainly because Will was sure he was about to have his thoughts demolished by the heavy hand of logic. Instead, after a few minutes, Zeller closed the notebook, narrowed his eyes and handed it back to Will without looking at him. It took all the willpower he had at that moment not to peek inside Zeller’s head to find out what he was thinking.

“So?” Will asked, running out of patience.

“So,” Brian repeated, “you telling me you think it’s not exactly a coincidence that our victims fall under the remit of this Aman you and Jack visited?”

“That’s the long and short of it,” Will fidgeted, feeling exposed, “fuck’s sake Zeller, either tell me I’m insane or give me your theory, I’m not a patient guy.”

“I’ve noticed,” Zeller said wryly; standing up he walked a few paces in one direction, then the other, “got any idea why these two things would correlate?”

“Not exactly. All I can fathom is that if she is linked, then she’s leaking the personal information of unnaturals, either to our killers or to someone who is then passing that information on.”

“Thinking that’s a good enough reason to pay a visit?”

“You’re taking this unexpectedly well,” Will said suspiciously.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Brian frowned, “Hey, you said you wanted to tell me this. I’m not a fucking nark, ok?”

“Oh yeah?” Will said, making Zeller start when Will caught his eye, “prove it.”

“Screw you, Graham,” Zeller said angrily, “I don’t need to cow tow to you.”

“Just shut up and concentrate,” Will bit out, “ok?”

“You’d better not..!”

Zeller was easy to read in a way that Will appreciated in people with logical minds. Everything orderly, filed like an archive. But there was a sweet addendum to the man’s head-space: he was a rebel, and the rebellious side of him liked to clutter, to have curves instead of neat right angles, to present a little flair in his mind that most at the bureau didn’t possess. It was satisfying, made the journey a pleasure rather than a slog.

By the time Will pulled back, Zeller was left looking a little squeamish, breathless.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Don’t get all bent out of shape, I didn’t read your mind. Just took a walk through your emotional centres. No big deal.”

“No big..? Don’t ever do that again!”

“What?” Will grinned, “Like it? I’ve heard it’s quite a rush.”

“Shut your mouth for just one minute, would you *please*.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” Will said, shrugging.

Zeller had opened his mouth to retort, but luckily for Will Beverly took that moment to return from scouting. From the look in her eyes she knew something weird had happened in her absence, but didn’t bother to bring it up. Instead she looked around the kitchen and frowned.

“Find anything?” she asked.

“Not really,” Brian answered, rubbing at his face, “other than this house has been abandoned for years.”

“Abandoned? Are you sure?” Beverly asked, incredulous even as she took in the dilapidated furniture and dirty floor, “the neighbours on both sides said that they saw the whole family going out to their car just three days ago. One of them said they saw Mr and Mrs. Hobbs just last night. The only thing they said was weird is that they haven’t seen their cat around in a while.”

“Then there’s an illusion spell,” Will shrugged, “probably on the perimeter. Keep nosey neighbours happy,” when Beverly raised her brows Will smirked, “nosey neighbours wouldn’t stand for weeds that long in the garden without complaining, would they? I bet if you ask they’ll say the Hobbs keep a nice mowed lawn.”

“But if they haven’t lived here for years, where have they been?” Zeller asked, before waving a hand and frowning, “wait, are you telling me the Hobbs are witches?”

Wetting his lips, Will forced himself to remain neutral, “Or they hired one. Who knows.”

“Well then, shouldn’t we contact the local coven?” Beverly asked, “They’d have info right? If they were witches, or if not then who they might have hired.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Will said sourly; noticing Katz and Zeller’s inquisitive glances back and forth Will rolled his eyes, “oh for fuck’s sake, I just don’t want to deal with the Maryland Coven. They’re a bunch of sanctimonious pricks.”

“Really?” Zeller said, mouth quirked with reprisal, “I guess you haven’t heard what the Maryland Coven have been saying about you for the past couple of weeks.”

“Well, that insinuates that I give two shits what the MLCV think,” Will said, blasé; when there was a noticeable lull Will sighed, “let me guess,” he continued as he sat down on the arm of a dusty chair, “it was some statement distancing themselves from my sordid self.”

“They said they didn’t condone necromancy,” Zeller said.

“Yeah, only in the last ten years or so,” Will muttered, “before that they had more scars than I do.”

“So you think they’re our best bet?” Beverly asked.

“If we want info, then they’ll at least…” Will started, then suddenly stopped, mouth left hanging open; Zeller and Katz stared at him, frowning worriedly.

For Will he had felt the curtain drop, and the unveiling was sudden and harsh. All he could think about were Beverly’s words from minutes ago: ‘The only thing they said was weird is that they haven’t seen their cat around in a while’. It all began to slot together. The wheels started spinning without his consent. Jessica Salome, tins of cat food on her counter but no cat found at her home. Melinda Inman, there had been a litter box at her house, cat toys, but no cat. In the report it had said Hoit had dog leashes and collars, tennis balls, but the dog had never been found. Jack had assumed the killers were disposing of the pets. Mike’s ghost, telling him the last thing he could remember before his death, ‘A man, a woman and a girl’.

No cat. *The seals, blazoned into the houses*. No dog. *No correlation between victims as to how someone was getting inside*. A man, a woman and a girl. *An unknown intruder with magical ability*. As a sense of dread began to creep across his shoulders, he found the most difficult thing was being the only one in the room who knew the truth.

“It’s nothing,” Will lied easily, shrugging, “we should go, come on.”

It was on returning to the SUV that Will found whatever little composure he’d been able to scrape back disappeared in a puff of smoke. There, as he opened the back door, lay something that gave a reaction he couldn't explain, *made his skin chill to goosebumps, his breathing speed up without his consent*. A plain, manilla envelope emblazoned with only two words: his name, in bold black marker pen. Will swallowed. He had left the window cracked to help air out the car since Zeller had been blasting the heating like crazy and it had made him feel nauseous. *Someone had posted it through like a letterbox.* He looked around the neighbourhood, seeing nothing but the usual suburbia, neutral and staid. No cars out of place, no people lurking.

Reaching out as Zeller and Katz got into the car, oblivious, Will picked up the envelope and bit at his lip, getting into the car and strapping himself in. On top of his many theories about this damnable case, being stalked just put the cherry on the shit sundae.

Like hunger pains, only stronger, more pronounced, and with a side of nausea. Will felt the gun dig in against his right palm, nipping at his fingers with cold metal teeth. The wind was buffeting the car again and again, like a cat with a terrified mouse . The sound was obnoxious, the whistling roar, but Will barely heard it . Couldn’t think about it, concentrate on it.

Hurricane Irene had never made landfall, but she was making her presence known in the Chesapeake Bay. The docklands were thrilling with wind speeds enough to take your feet from under you. The sea, a gloomy steel grey, was awash with white horses champing and stamping and charging into the dock walls, up and over in plumes fifteen feet high. The lights on the cranes swayed; sometimes he caught sight of something flying through the air, debris big enough to take out an unsuspecting person. The warehouses rattled and rippled, roofs threatening to come loose

and fly, the trees bent at unnatural angles.

And somewhere, somewhere here amidst the hellish chaos, was the answer. An answer that they had all thought lost, had come to terms with never finding, now dangling in front of them like a carrot on a stick .

For the twentieth time Will fished his phone out of his jacket pocket and tried to dial. The dim light on the cellphone showed nothing but low battery and no signal. With a curse Will threw it onto the passenger seat and took a deep breath.

"The tower's down, that's all," he said to himself, "Jack's coming, they're all coming. It's going to be ok. All be ok," he muttered as he rubbed at his face, pinching at his eyes until he could see spots fading in and out before opening them again , "just need to…"

His words caught in his throat and Will felt his body involuntarily start forwards and grab the wheel, eyes wide as if to catch what little light there was. There, beyond the thump and whine of the window wipers pushing the rain in rivers across his windshield, was the flitting shape of a human. He was sure, wasn't he? Not just a trick of his eyes, the lights dancing. No, there it was again! Once, then twice he saw it as it ran behind a crate, then dashed for the warehouse closest to his parking spot. It took every fibre of his being not to jump the gun as the figure opened a door which flew out of its grasp and slammed back against the wall, pinned by the wind. The figure paid no heed, sprinting inside and disappearing.

It was in that moment Will's moral fibre gave out.

The wind was blinding, forcing him to lift his arms to cover his face as he ran, eyes watering. The rain was painful and freezing, soaking through his jacket, his shirt, his jeans and leaving him a sodden, chattering mess by the time he weaved and pushed his way to the door he had seen. He did not enter so much as he was pushed inside by the storm. Standing inside the doorway Will lowered his arms to find that he was shaking, and that his eyes weren't taking time to adjust so much as there was nothing to adjust to; everything was pitch black. Behind him the wind howled at the open doorway, like the sound of someone blowing across the neck of a bottle. With cold fingers he hunted for his flashlight, finding it and clicking it on.

It was a corridor, but something about it felt more like a tunnel. The floor was beginning to run with water being pushed in from outside. The air was cold and damp and the light didn't seem to reach far, as if the atmosphere was thick with fog. Will clutched at his jacket with his free hand and took two long breaths as he moved the light around, fidgeting on his feet.

"Don't go in without back up," he was whispering to himself, "she wouldn't go in without back up. You idiot, you fucking idiot no one will know where you are…"

But at the same time his need to run in without thinking was horrifyingly strong. So strong that it hurt to turn and run back to his car, tripping and falling once, banging himself into his car twice. Still no signal on the phone . The best he could think to do was turn the key and drive his car up to the door, leaving the engine purring and the headlights on, illuminating the maw-like doorway for all to see. A last ditch effort to leave breadcrumbs.

Echoing as he walked . His footsteps splashed, and the sound bounced around as if cavernous even though the corridor stayed narrow and fearfully dark. There was a right turn, then a left, then he

was faced with a choice; a staircase leading up, and another down. Standing still, Will strained to listen for footsteps or noises of any kind. It was only then that he realised how deadened the air around him had become. There was no noise. The raging of the storm had disappeared. The wind, the rain, the tumultuous sea. There was nothing beyond the sound of his own breathing.

"Fuck," Will muttered to himself as he routed in his pocket for the thing he had kept on him since she had first handed it over; he remembered how smug Miriam had been, making a quip about him being barely able to find his ass with both hands most of the time . The St. Christopher medallion shone in his palm as he stared at it, mumbling, "Ba mhaith leat lámh an úinéara a mhothú arís."

Immediately, without any hesitation, the small, silver medallion sped from his palm and hit the floor running, hurrying its way to the stairs and making a considered effort to stay upright and rolling as it began to tinkle down the stairs. Will kept after it like a dog handler with a bloodhound. They must have gone down three flights before they reached another doorway, this one closed tight. In the back of his mind Will felt chill at the thought of a warehouse with a three storey basement, trying and failing to register if the space he was now in existed at all or was merely an illusion, an extension through magic.

The small medallion was leaping up and rolling into the door, but just as Will arrived and made to pick it up the medallion managed to flop onto its side and slip under the doorway. Will bit out a curse as the coin slipped away.

" Shit!" he hurried up from his crouch and tried the handle, expecting it to be locked, only…

It swung open without any effort. Breathing hard, Will licked his lips and aimed the flashlight low at the ground. The air felt thick as he walked in as quietly as he could, humid and yet chill. Without daring to raise the light to illuminate the room it was difficult to tell how big the space was. All he could do was listen carefully, waiting, waiting…

There! The unmistakable sound of a coin falling and spinning on the ground, the wobbling of metal against stone as it spun faster and faster before ringing to a close. Will hurried forwards, the air itself seeming to putrefy as he came closer to his goal.

" Miriam," he hissed, feeling as if the air itself swallowed his words, holding them hostage, " Miriam! *"*

"... pf- lease…" came the faint, muffled reply.

For a moment, Will thought he might have imagined it. But his feel carried him forwards, and his heart leapt as the light illuminated the stone plinth that appeared before him, the St Christopher coin shining brightly at its base, and atop it an arm, then a body, then a face as he nearly tripped running forwards.

"I don't believe it," he was huffing, almost dropping his flashlight, lifting it and shining it down onto something he wished he'd never seen, could forget, would not haunt his waking life from then on .

Milky eyes stared up at him as a rotten hand reached for his jacket, fingers curling in and snapping off, a hideous croaking leaving her throat as the ruined mouth, sewn almost shut with blood encrusted thread, pried open and breathed out three wheezing words.

“The little pissant called an assembly without me!”

As Bedelia yanked the door of the Bentley shut behind her and pulled down her seatbelt she threw her half closed umbrella into the footwell; Hannibal sighed through his nose and indicated back out into traffic. He hated the rain, it was terribly inconvenient. Caused people to subvert their usual patterns, brought down their moods and generally made a mess. Today of all days it was going to make his next venture just that little bit harder.

“Chilton is flexing his new claws, I see,” Hannibal said neutrally.

“Don’t start with me, Hannibal. I don’t need your running commentary.”

“You are well aware of my habits,” Hannibal turned out onto Eastern Avenue and slowed at the lights, “if you did not want to hear my thoughts, you wouldn’t have brought it up.”

“Sometimes a lady just likes to vent, without narration. Now can you take me to pick up my car and just *listen* for once.”

Smiling, Hannibal looked to her and inclined his head. *Such a delightfully vain and caustic creature under all that charm and elegance, it was what had drawn him in, what had made him want her so all those years ago.* She watched him suspiciously, but then seemed to tire of waiting and carried on regardless.

“He called everyone in, all his little foolish cronies. They met at his place and, you won’t believe this…”

“Murdered Louise Hobbs in his own home before displaying her corpse in St. Mary’s park.”

Her shock was sweet enough to risk the venom that would surely follow. Hannibal drank it in like ambrosia.

“Fucking hell Hannibal, can’t you let me have anything?” she spat, “And how the hell do you know that?”

“I think I’d rather ask how *you* know.”

“I’m giving you enough as it is,” she huffed, “I’m not going to give away my sources.”

“Well, you already know mine. The murder site was just an educated guess. Chilton doesn’t care about bloodying his own nest, and it would allow for full control of the carnage.”

“You think they passed her around like take out?” Bedelia asked.

“Why ask when you are sure of the answer?”

She shrugged, “I just like to hear you try and fathom out things I already know.”

“Oh? Although, I am sure I have something very interesting that you do not, my dear.”

Quick blue eyes, regarding him sharply. He figured that her venomous bluster had been mainly an act, but was yet to figure out exactly what she was trying to subvert. Keeping quiet as he drove was the easiest way to tease out her curiosity.

“Oh come on,” she said finally, rolling her eyes, “you don’t give anything away for free. What do you want?”

“You wound me, darling,” he said, feigning hurt, “and I love it so.”

“Get over yourself, will you? And hurry up with it, we’re almost at my dealership. Piece of shit Mercedes does nothing but break down.”

“Actually, I had thought you might prefer a quick jaunt before collecting your, as you say, piece of shit.”

Silence, broken only by the thud and whine of window wipers. Bedelia took a long break, gave a quick, unreadable smirk and looked at him, narrow eyed. Hannibal dismissed most of her smoke and mirrors and, instead, waited for her reply.

“I should have known you wouldn’t give me a ride without a fee.”

“Sometimes assistance is more precious than money.”

“What is it this time?”

“I need your help with a dinner invitation,” Hannibal said, knowing she would understand.

“Oh, no way, not for the price of a *car ride*,” she said, dubious.

“I can sweeten the pot.”

“It better be honey sweet,” she said, surly.

“Only the best. I am sure I have something you can lord over our little king Chilton.”

That had her attention. Licking gently at her painted red lips, Bedelia settled back into the plush car seat and folded her hands in her lap.

“Go on.”

“Mine first, then yours.”

“Nice try,” she said dryly, “think I’m going to take you at your word?”

“You would like assurance? Well, I’m sure I can give you a name to tempt out your hunting instinct,” Hannibal said as they sped past the Mercedes Benz dealership in a flash of tires and spattered rain, “Abigail Hobbs.”

Instantaneous; *he could see her pupils dilate, nostrils flaring ever so subtly*. Then she was once more calm, serene, even as she bit at the inside of her cheek.

“What about her?” she asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Yes. I would.”

“Then can I rely on your assistance?” Hannibal asked.

“Have I ever let you down?” she asked with a knowing smile.

That they both laughed at the joke made the air sour on Hannibal’s tongue. *Memories of her betrayal, hot and slick.* The sweetness would come when this was all over, when all of the wrongs had been righted, and all of the venom was back in the fangs from which it came.

When the teacup was once again whole.

His fingers were shaking, and he couldn’t tell quite why. The first room on the right on the third floor; *a small room used for meetings, no windows, a door that locked*. Hustling into the dark room allowed him to slip away as Katz and Zeller headed off to find Jack and give their report. Closing his eyes Will leaned his back against the door and swallowed, reaching up blindly to flip the light switch. The envelope slid across the table he threw it onto. Will licked his lips and looked at it sceptically.

“Been following me, huh?” he spoke to it, circling round, grabbing a nearby chair by the back and drawing it across the carpeted floor, “Don’t want to be seen, but you’re desperate to show me something.”

Sitting down was precise and yet nerve racking. *What if this was from their killers? What if this was a trap?* He should have handed it in, he should have had the scryers make sure it hadn’t been tampered with. *Why didn’t you, huh?* he asked himself. Only it was an empty question. Will already knew that the silent envelope spoke of secrets, he could feel it in the way his name was written big and bold on the paper.

It ripped open just like any other envelope, even as he did so hesitantly. Will tipped it up and a slew of papers and photographs slid out in a slurry across the tabletop. Frowning he put the envelope down and picked up the topmost photo. At first he didn’t recognise the woman there, but then as his mind adjusted the figure took shape.

“Hannah?” Will muttered.

Many years younger, and in a group of women he didn’t know, but it was her; his Matron, proud in her bearing, eyes sharp. She wore a pair of ratty jeans and a flannel shirt, hair cut short. Next to her were two women who appeared to be identical twins, long blonde hair, expressions rather shy. And

then on the end was another, dark wavy hair and full lips, eyes avoiding the camera as she appeared to look at something behind the picture taker. Turning it over, Will found two words:

'*Already pregnant'*

Something in the scrawled ink set the hairs at the nape of his neck on edge. Will let the photo drop and sat back, fingers curling around the edge of the table. There was an awful sense of dread tickling across his skin, like vertigo. Will reached for his phone and hit his calls, tapping the most recent while his eyes scanned what he could see of the documents splayed across the table. When the phone was answered Will was taken aback, expecting to hear the voicemail message.

"Will?" Hannah answered.

"It's me," he said, not knowing why; he felt unsure, lost, "I've been calling you."

"They told me I had to turn my phone off. Where are you?"

"They told..? Who told you?" Will frowned, shaking his head and rubbing at his eyes, "Hannah, I need to talk to you, something's happening and I...god I don't know…"

"Calm down young man," no matter what, her stern voice always managed to centre him, "you're darn right something's going on. You have some explaining to do alright."

"Me? What the heck are you talking about? I've just had…"

"Never mind that, I don't like speaking about important things over the phone. Come down and get me?"

"Jesus, Hannah, you're driving me crazy here, what the fuck are you talking about?" Will groaned.

"They won't let me in at the desk. The woman here is being very obstinate."

And it was then Will realised. Frowning turned to confusion turned to wide eyed realisation. In only a few seconds Will had swept up the contents of the envelope, tapped them messily together and stuffed them back into the manilla. Everything seemed to be spiralling out of his control, bouncing on his feet as he rode down in the elevator. People swerved out of his way as he ran towards the front door, dodging through as he caught bits and pieces of thoughts and feelings, '*watch where you're going, christ!', 'would it kill you to say sorry?'*.

There was no time to contemplate rudeness. Will was left standing on the other side of the metal detectors, out of breath and staring in disbelief at the wizened old woman currently arguing with Gale, the security guard at the front desk. When she looked up and caught sight of him she thinned her lips triumphantly and pointed.

"There he is, he'll sort out this silly misunderstanding," Hannah said, bright eyes shining, "I told you, young lady, *my son* works here."

The fluorescent lights plinked and buzzed into life. Hannibal frowned in displeasure, thinking to himself that he should look at replacing them soon before they blew at an inopportune moment. Nothing worse than trying to work by candlelight. *Although*, he thought as he slipped his arms into the vinyl suit, making sure to keep his tartan jacket from riding up in the sleeves, *it would bring back memories.*

As he zipped up the front he took a moment to inspect his tray, *scalpel, arterial and bone clamps, forceps and cotton swabs, elevators, needle holders, bone saw, finochietto retractor.* Bedelia was as excellent a nurse as she was a decoy. *Watching her work in tandem with his own machinations was always a charming experience, as they had walked into the secure residence without any resistance whatsoever and then back out with exactly what they needed.* He had told her what he planned, and she had laid out everything he would want.

“The Registry will find out what you have done,” came the calm declaration from the woman strapped down to his operating table, “they always do.”

“Ah, but then I am counting on it,” Hannibal replied as he set about preparing a drip, “you of all people should understand why.”

“You are afraid,” she said, her dark eyes moving from their blank stare at the ceiling to focus on him, “that he will find out what you are doing. And what you have done.”

“Afraid is a relative term,” Hannibal said, sniffing as he pressed the needle into her arm, “Now, Dr. Unger,” he said as he taped the cannula into place, cocking his head as he looked into her eyes and observed the lack of emotion, no fear, no panic, only the weight imposed by more time than should be experienced by one soul, “if you will permit me, a few questions before you go.”

The dark eyes returned their stare to the ceiling as the procedure began.

Chapter End Notes

"Nocht do rúin"
Reveal your secrets

"Ba mhaith leat lámh an úinéara a mhothú arís"
You want to feel your owner's hand again

Womb

Chapter Notes

> Why hello! Apologies for such a long hiatus on this story. I am getting back into it, and hopefully there will be some answers to the mysteries coming soon...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn't a loud noise that woke her. Not a flash of light or an acrid smell or an itch. For all intents and purposes she should have slept peacefully until morning, when she would get up and make breakfast, walk into his room and wake him for school.

Instead it was dark, and she came to with a feeling of dread shaking across her skin, something that made her breath stutter as she fumbled out from beneath the soft blanket and sat on the side of the bed, staring into the room.

Something was wrong.

"*Will," was the first word from her lips.*

Up and walking, arms out in front of her to feel for the light switch, bumping into the side table with a curse. A click and the light illuminated everything in a harsh glow, aching against her eyes. The feeling didn't dissipate. Instead it only made it worse . *Out in a flash and down the hall, turning the door knob and opening his door quietly, the word fell from her lips once more.*

"*Will?"*

The glow in the dark stars on his ceiling were only just now beginning to fade, his tape player had clicked off and the nightlight on his bedside table had long gone out. Yet, there was just enough illumination to see that the bed before her was empty, nothing but a tussle of bedsheets tangled with a story book and a flashlight.

No time to let the panic set in. She ran for the front door, stubbing her toe as she searched for her sandals. The night air outside was balmy and thick, like the darkness was made of silken fingers trying to grasp and pull her back down into sleep. Only the adrenaline kept her sharp, heightened, alert. Only one word was on her lips.

"*Will!" she shouted into the night time, "Will where are you honey?"*

No reply. The woods were grim even as she kick-started the generator and turned on the outdoor lights, flooding the trees with a sickly glow. Hannah Robicheaux felt the anxiety rising into full blown panic, her heart beating faster, faster, her brain taken over by fear, her limbs frozen with indecision...

"*Quiet yourself girl," she closed her eyes and muttered, clenching her fists, "where's worrying gonna get you? Nowhere, that's what. Now* think."

She waited until her shoulders were no longer up round her ears, but relaxed down, loose and soft. That was when the answer came. Taking a deep breath she centred herself, opening her eyes slowly, purposefully. Matron Fabienne wouldn't have stood for her being in a flap, all her girls were calm and contrite when casting. No good came from magic in a tizzy.

"*Ceangailte agus Ceangailteacha," she said clear and calm, "Ceangailteacha Ceangailte. Féach an Radharc, Éist leis an bhFuaim. Cad a cailleadh, Faightear anois."*

And there! A tug at her nightshirt, like a shy child's hand gripping the material, too quiet to speak. Hannah took off round the porch, round the back through the gate in the chain link fence, rushing over tree roots and wet mud. Without thinking too much about it she allowed the spell to lead her where it needed to take her, all the while her mind was spinning, filled with thoughts worse than could ever be. Her poor cherie, if anything were to happen to him she would never forgive herself...

Yet, what she rushed into in reality was much more worrying than any of the scenarios she could have concocted. Beyond the creek, up into the clearing Will liked to play in when she was busy having visitors, there was a familiar, hulking shadow. Scrambling up the bank Hannah stopped, out of breath, and stared.

"Not again."

As they drove, the phone rang, loud and abrasive in the quiet that it had interrupted. Holding off for as long as he could, Will finally answered when Hannah simply gave a long sigh from the passenger's seat, her rich hazel eyes staring out the window as the city flew by.

"Fucking fine," Will mumbled to himself as he pulled over sharply, grabbing the phone and answering tightly, "Graham."

"Where the hell are you?" Jack's voice, making Will regret answering at all, "Zeller and Katz said you all came back together. I need you in conference room three, apparently Price has something he wants to discuss."

There was a short hesitation that spoke volumes. Flicking his eyes to the right, he watched Hannah as she in turn watched everything else but him. *Still as beautiful as the days he remembered from his childhood, skin the colour of bronze and a face like an Egyptian queen, only now in a somewhat wizened package, wrinkles across her face like sand dunes, lustrous black hair now grey, hidden and tied up tight beneath her traditional Elder's headdress of interlacing painted silks.*

"I can't right now," he said, knowing how well that would go over.

"You can't," Jack said as if repeating something he hadn't understood, "right now."

"No. Something's come up that I have to take care of. Personal."

"Will, I don't think you're hearing me right..." Jack said, *Will could hear the fury building in his tone.*

"Oh no, I heard you," Will sighed, "look, I'll be back as soon as I can. Give me half an hour. Can you give me half an hour?"

“I’ll tell you what I can give you Graham...” Jack seethed.

“That’s right, half an hour,” Will chimed in before hanging up abruptly.

Phone back in the pocket, Will turned the engine over and flicked his indicator on. While they waited to merge into traffic, Hannah finally spoke up.

“It’s good to know you’ve been getting along with everyone so well, just like you used to,” she said with a wry smile.

“And it's good to know you still know how to use a phone to let people know when you’re planning a trip,” Will bit out sarcastically, still sore from her jack-in-the-box appearance out of nowhere, *and the memory of the manilla envelope of secrets sitting on his backseat.*

“I didn’t think you’d mind,” she said simply, “never bothered you before.”

“I’m in the middle of an investigation. You *know* that.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you too.”

As they braked at a red light, Will jerked the handbrake up and closed his eyes, centring himself. *Always so much easier to deal with her over the phone, where he felt removed, kept apart by distance, enough that he didn’t need to feel the pressure of her presence.* The one redeeming feature of his Elder was her utterly flawless ability to shield her mind from him. Looking at Hannah’s mind was like trying to read static on a television; all it gave you was a nauseous headache if you tried too hard.

Rubbing at his face he opened his eyes and stared at the traffic lights. Still, there was nothing worse than the person you respected most in the world showing up just as your life was falling apart.

“So,” Will said once they were driving again, *trying his best to sound neutral* , “Where am I taking you right now? I have to get back to work as soon as. You booked a hotel?”

“Why would I have?” she said, giving a small, hearty laugh, “I’m staying with you, obviously.”

“I’ll get you a hotel,” Will said tightly, “I’ll pay for it, it’s fine.”

“You want me staying with a whole house full of strangers, when I come to visit my own son?” she said, giving him a look that left no compromise.

“Great,” Will nodded, lips thinned, “just fucking great.”

“Why? Aren’t we going to your house?” She asked in a way that made Will instantly suspicious; he could see her looking at the faded bruises on his face, but she stayed quiet on that front. Will wished she wasn’t so good at manipulating him.

“No. Home’s not safe right now,” Will said, wondering when he’d started agreeing with Lecter on that point, “I’m staying with a friend.”

“Oh,” she said with a smile that spoke volumes, “you’ve met someone again.”

“No, I haven’t,” Will felt himself flush, hating that it was so difficult to lie to her, “for fucks sake why do you always assume..?”

“Last time it was that hottie, what was her name? Alana,” Hannah punctuated the name with a pointed finger, “Shame that you really screwed that one up. I liked her.”

“Oh for Christ's *sake* ,” Will ground out, feeling miserably embarrassed even though there was no one else there to see it, “I was not...it wasn’t a *thing* . We were just friends.”

“What, with benefits huh?”

“ *Hannah* ,” Will said tightly, “would you fucking please shut the hell up?”

She just shrugged, smiling, *too used to his bullshit to let it make a dent in her armour anymore, “* It’s an Elder’s duty to know her wards better than they know themselves.”

“No, that’s just something you made up to facilitate being a nosey old bag. How do you always fucking know when I’ve met someone? Fuck’s sake! It’s an Elder’s duty to keep the magic pure, not meddle in their kid’s love lives.”

“Oh, so it’s *love* this time.”

“Hannah, *in ainm Brigid* I swear that I won’t stop the car to kick you out this time.”

“The duties of an Elder are broad and malleable,” she said sagely while Will rolled his eyes once he’d made sure she couldn’t see him do it; there was a pause, and then, “being one yourself now, you should know that.”

“You...” Will hesitated and then his lips thinned; he supposed he should have known better, “so you came to meet the baby witch, huh?”

“I came to visit *you* ,” Hannah said strongly, “because I was sick fed up of waiting for you to come to us.”

“You know why I don’t visit often,” Will said softly.

“...I know,” she said with a sigh, reaching out to pat his hand as it rested on the gear stick, “I know, honey.”

And for a moment, *just a sweet moment of relief* , he felt like a little boy again. No responsibilities other than his chores, no worries except whether he’d get to stay up late and watch the movie that night or get enough pocket money to go to the store and buy another book or...It lasted just long enough to calm him down, but not long enough to make things right.

Will chewed on the inside of his bottom lip and wondered when the hell his life had become so complicated. The manilla envelope sitting behind him on the backseat sang a siren song. Will wished he could forget about it, throw it on the fire before it gave away too many secrets, *before he maybe saw something he wouldn’t be able to unsee.* Glancing at Hannah out the corner of his eye, he debated whether or not to bring it up. *Later* , he told himself grimly, *later once you’ve had the chance to look over it properly.*

It took another twenty minutes to wind his way through downtown, and end up on the leafy avenue where Lecter lived. He could see Hannah staring around her, eyebrows raised.

“Got yourself a rich one this time,” she said slyly.

“Fuck off,” he said easily, “and I mean it. He’s a colleague, don’t make this weird, ok?”

“Oh, a he is it? That’s exotic,” Hannah said, spritely as they pulled up into the driveway next to Lecter’s Bentley; Hannah ogled the car openly “would you look at that.”

“Can you keep your eyes in their sockets, *Sinsear* ,” he said, making her scowl at the formal language, waving her hand dismissively at him.

When he saw her eyes stop, focusing in at his collarbone, *the leather thong there, the bone tied tight,* he knew that everything he hadn’t told her, everything he had kept hidden as to the spiralling out of control, the knowing that everything would eventually come to *blood and pain and death* , was clear in the fact he was wearing it all.

Hannah tilted her head, catching his eye before he looked away, "Haven’t seen you wearing a gris-gris in a long time. Things are getting bad again, aren’t they,” she said, *not a question, but a statement.*

“...Yeah. Yeah they are,” Will didn’t see the point in lying, “but this time, I’m going to fix it,” stopping to add, “we’re not staying here, alright? We go in, you meet Abigal, and then I’m getting you a hotel.”

Getting out of the car was simplest, because staying in there was tantamount to *staying in the shell of the egg, refusing to hatch* . Sometimes he had to remind himself that the past was an unattainable, rosy-tinted lie, and trying to recapture it was a folly he’d fallen into far too many times. As he walked around and opened the door for her, helping her down from the truck, it seemed that Hannah might be thinking the same thing.

His finger hesitated, only a moment, before ringing the doorbell. The whole day had been a whirlwind of crap, so much so that he had barely given himself time to remember how it had started. *Waking up safe, waking up close, waking up to the smell of another against his skin, waking up to slip away, leave him sleeping soundly, waking up to make breakfast, waking up to avoid the issue.* Will wondered, as he listened for the sound of the lock, when he was actually going to wake up for real.

So far, it had all been going disturbingly well.

“I know you normally only take clients on referral, but I had hoped that a referral from another client might suffice.”

“Well, as yours is a most interesting case,” Lecter smiled politely, “I think I might have to consider it.”

Tobias Budge had always prided himself on his ability to blend into whatever role suited him best. At this moment, *the intriguing psychological case of lawyer Lawrence Walsh, not too exotic, but enough to pique interest* . And so far, it was working. He had called at the best time of the day, *right after lunch when people tended to feel looser, a little tired from the morning and the digesting of a meal.* It hadn’t taken as much convincing as he had thought, enough to make him feel a spike of suspicion, but then he had seen the slight glint in Lecter’s eye and known why this would be simpler than he expected.

The same sort of look that Frederick gave him on a hunt, or at the end of one, both slick with blood on skin singing from the adrenaline high. Only Lecter's interest wasn't as animalistic as Chilton's. No, he thought, this one was too refined to give someone the bedroom eyes. It was slightly refreshing, in a way, to be lusted after in a demure fashion.

"Well, I am glad to hear that," he said, making sure to add a flattered tone, eyes looking away as he rubbed his hands awkwardly together, "honestly, if you hadn't said yes I don't know what I would have done."

"Well, there are plenty of other parapsychologists in Baltimore," Lecter said as he led him through to his office, *a study decked out with leather furniture in pale green and high bookcases in walnut and cherry, the walls adorned with antique light fittings and impressive racks of antlers which he found amusing for their exhibitionism.*

"Don't I know it," he said, looking around appraisingly, "I've tried most of them now, I think."

"And no one was a taker?" Lecter asked, watching him curiously as he approached his desk, opening a drawer, "I find that surprising."

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant," Tobias managed to sound flustered, then laugh, "I don't think it was always them who had the aversion."

"I see," Lecter seemed to shed the signs of caution, *the slight narrowing of his eyes, the stilling of his movements* , and relax, "it is important to find a psychiatrist with which you feel agreeable. May I ask who you have seen so far?"

"Uh, well Haverman was first. And another called Jasney. A few wouldn't even give me an appointment. And then the last, Chilton..."

That name at least got a reaction, which was nice. He would have to let Frederick know that Lecter appeared to be listening out for news of him, that would give him a kick if nothing else.

"...he came highly recommended, but I don't know," Tobias said, shrugging as he approximated a look of disquiet before shaking it away, "I just didn't feel comfortable."

Lecter tipped his head, watching him closely, "And do you feel comfortable now?"

Smiling sheepishly, he scratched at his neck and tried to look nervous, "Ah, well, I suppose I haven't really been thinking about it. Which must mean that I am."

"That is good to hear," Lecter nodded once, reaching into the drawer to pull out a set of sheets of many colours, stapled together at a corner; walking towards him he handed it over, "If you would please fill out these forms. A mere formality, but necessary if you are to receive treatment."

"Do I need to post them anywhere? Or hand them in?" he asked, hoping to hell that the answer was no because any trace of him being here was too much as far as he was concerned.

"Not at all, I will file them for you. Just bring them with you on your first session, I'll take care of the rest."

"Great," he smiled, *flustered because he knew it was charming,* "well, I mean thank you, Doctor Lecter. I really appreciate this."

“Not at all. Apologies to rush you, but I’m afraid I have many pressing issues to attend to today. May I see you to the door?”

“I would like that,” Tobias said, nodding.

Which was fortuitous timing, it seemed, because at that moment the doorbell chimed. A moment of hesitation from his host that Tobias found a fascinating reaction in such a powerful, self-assured creature as Lecter. Still, not enough to have Tobias stay where he was while Lecter attended the door, or hurried out the back like an adulterer’s little secret. *Not yet anyway,* he thought with a smile as he followed Lecter to the entranceway.

The door opened to reveal something he hadn’t thought he would get to enjoy so soon. *Chilton would be so jealous* , he thought giddily as he stared at the two people on the other side of the doorway; *one a little old woman who he couldn’t care less about, and the other...*

Will Graham was better in the flesh than he was on film or in photographs. A pretty thing, in a way, *soulful grey eyes, a beautiful mouth, body fit and lean beneath too many layers of clothing.* But fierce, somehow managing to create an air of standoffishness without doing anything too overt, *like a dog that wagged its tail while it growled low in its throat.* He could see the appeal, *and the more he looked the more he could see it* . He was sure Lecter would be enjoying himself, he thought with a sly smile. Could see it now, *Lecter fisting his hand into those curls, pulling Graham’s head back tight to bite at his neck while they fucked, those cupid’s lips begging for more.* The flash of fantasy was enjoyable; who knew, he thought, maybe if he did a good enough job of this he could convince Lecter to have them take Graham together. A nice little memory to have before such a beautiful creature met its fate.

“Ah, Will, it is good to see you,” Lecter said, smooth as you like; Tobias found himself impressed. It appeared to take quite a lot to disconcert the Doctor. *He looked forward to finding out what.* Turning to him, Lecter continued, “It was good to meet you, Lawrence Walsh. I will be in touch.”

“Of course, thank you,” he said, reaching out to accept the handshake; there was nothing better than a distinguished pseudonym, he thought smugly “excuse me,” he said sheepishly to the two blocking the doorway.

The woman stepped back but Graham stayed put, refusing to move rather than *just not moving* , staring at him openly, eyes hard. Tobias slipped in between them, *breathing in as he caught a whiff of a scent so appetising that it made his salivary glands effuse, forcing him to swallow.* For a moment he thought he might be forced to stop and lean in, *draw the scent deep into his lungs, extend his tongue out to lick at the flesh...* but managed through sheer force of will to keep walking.

As far as he was concerned, their plan was surely a mere formality now. *Nothing human could smell that fucking good,* he thought with a smile as he walked towards his car. Graham was lucky he was necessary for their plans. If not, he would have been happy to rip him limb from limb and drink him down like wine.

This, he thought with a shiver, was going to be his best assignment yet.

The heavy, intense feel of it, so much, so fast, so unexpected, the image burned like a memory he’d never experienced, seeing himself through someone else’s eyes as he was taken...

Will cut the thought off quickly and pointedly as he heard a car start up behind him, the sound of wheels crunching over the driveway. Turning to look over his shoulder, he was just able to make out the image of the man driving the car, *committing the sight to memory out of spite.*

“Apologies,” Lecter was saying as he stood back from the door and gestured for them to enter, “you caught me working. Would you both like to come in?”

It seemed that, for a moment, the silence would become too much too soon to save this fucking hellish situation and allow him to just walk away. *Hannah and Hannibal were simply staring at each other, like statues in a workshop.* But then, as he thought he might just leave altogether, Hannah smiled and turned to Will.

“Oh so very gentlemanly indeed,” she said, *parroting his own words back at him from their phone conversation days before* , “Thank you..?” she said as she stepped inside and Lecter held out his hand to take her coat.

“Hannah, this is Doctor Hannibal Lecter,” Will introduced them hastily, “Dr. Lecter, this is my Elder, Hannah Robicheaux.”

“Delighted,” Hannibal tipped his head, “please, the sitting room is on your right, allow me,” Will wasn’t sure what to do with the surreal nature of watching Hannibal offer Hannah his arm, and her allowing it, letting him escort her across the hardwood floors of his home.

Following behind, Will closed the door and, antsy, flicked the snib on the lock. Flicking his mind out across the house he didn’t find anything, wondering if Abigail was maybe asleep. That thought at least managed to calm him as he hung around in the lobby, waiting for Hannibal to return. *A conversation about hot drinks from the next room, agreeing on strong coffee.* After a moment, he reappeared, not seeming to be in the slightest bit amazed to find Will skulking there.

“I am making coffee,” he stated, seeming to enjoy pointing out his knowledge of Will’s eavesdropping, “would you like to join me?”

Without answering, Will turned and followed Hannibal to the kitchen. It was quiet, at least. Though the tense nature of their previous conversation that morning could have had a lot to do with that. Will refused to apologise for his sharp words. *The thought of Abigail in danger...he refused to compromise where that was concerned.*

Taking off his jacket Will hung it neatly over the closest stool while Hannibal fetched a bag of coffee beans and a grinder. When the silence became unbearable, Will grimaced, giving in, “Who was that?”

“Who was who?” Lecter replied obtusely.

“That man, at the door.“

“Ah. A new client.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I wouldn’t have thought I’d have to remind you of doctor patient confidentiality, Will.”

“My guess,” Will continued, ignoring Lecter’s polite reply, “some sort of compulsive sexual behaviour. But with Unnaturals, because then why the hell else would he be coming to you?” Will enjoyed Hannibal’s look of slight disapproval, “What’s the matter? Am I close?”

“You know I would not tell you even if you were,” Hannibal ground down the beans loudly, as if pointedly making sure Will couldn’t reply; once he was done he approached a fascinatingly antiquated looking coffee maker comprised of a glass carafe attached by a series of pipes to a silver barrel with a spigot suspended over an oil wick. Will watched him as he set about preparing the coffee, “although,” Hannibal finally continued, “I wonder now if I should ask why..?”

“Because as he left he was projecting a very vivid image of the three of us fucking like rabbits,“ Will interrupted, enjoying Hannibal’s raised brow, “not something I needed to see, by the way.”

No need to admit that the image had started as *just himself and Hannibal, in the throws of ecstasy, only joined by the other man once the stranger had adjusted the fantasy to fit his needs, it seemed.* No need to admit that the first image had been one of the most erotic things Will thought he had ever seen in his life. *Something about it seeming so real, almost real enough that it seemed like it might have happened once, like a memory.* That somehow, even now, he thought he could feel those hands against him, gripping at his skin possessively.

It had happened before, sure, *seeing people fantasise about him in their heads, but it was never more than a fleeting glimpse because most people tried to subconsciously hide their more lurid thoughts, and sometimes their desires were so subconscious even they weren’t fully aware of them* . Not like this. Will cleared his throat.

“I see,” Hannibal said, seemingly unaffected by the news other than his initial reaction, “I would ask you to try your best not to read the minds of my other patients, Will. It is bad practice for someone in my profession.”

“Oh, sure,” Will choked out through a laugh, “coming from you, that’s rich.”

“You always assume the worst, don’t you?”

“From you? Maybe,” Will bit out; it was difficult sometimes, not to lash out. The anger was still hot from earlier, but no longer as direct, simply concentrated by the day. *I’m not angry at you,* he wanted to admit, *I'm just angry and you’re an easy target because you’re too fucking nice to shout back at me, ok? Because I don't understand you. Because I don’t know why you let me so close, without giving anything away for free.* Only a confession like that would never see the light of day.

“I appear to have misjudged the situation then?” Hannibal said, mind seeming to move laterally as he lit the wick, eyes intent on his actions; when he did not continue his train of thought Will sighed tightly, looking away to the windows, the back garden bright in the sunshine .

Part of him hating more than ever that he had no idea what Lecter was thinking, and part of him glad that he didn’t. Will stood, watching as Hannibal made up a milk jug, filled a sugar pot, and placed them on an ornate silver tray.

“Would you please fetch me three cups,” Hannibal asked as he opened a cutlery drawer, “the cupboard is behind you.”

“I don’t want anything to drink,” Will said darkly, even as he turned and fished out two large white coffee cups, “you’re just being fucking considerate for the sake of it.”

“This from the man who shows up on my doorstep with his relatives, unannounced,” Hannibal said, tone slightly sour.

“Yeah, well this was all your idea. If you hadn’t had me move out of my house and in here you wouldn’t be dealing with all this shit, now would you.”

Walking up to him casually, Hannibal appeared to be only marginally irritated by Will’s prickly demeanour. Holding out his hands, palms up, Hannibal waited. Will let out a derisive chuff of breath, putting the cups in Lecter’s hands with more force than necessary before turning and leaving before he made any more of a fool of himself.

Which was when he heard it. Voices, from the sitting room. Will felt himself hurrying forwards, only to slow as he reached the door. Peering in, it was so strange to see it. *Abigail perched on one of Lecter’s black leather couches, Hannah across from her sitting like a little old sage in an armchair that made her seem smaller than she really was.* Talking, they were just talking, but it made him feel...something he wasn’t willing to look at too closely yet. *Thinking of the evidence of Abigail's possible involvement in the ritualistic murders, clawing at his calm.* Will hated that he couldn’t be more frank with himself about the truth.

When Hannibal made to walk past him with the tray of coffee’s, Will reached out and stopped him. Lecter looked utterly unperturbed, which only made Will more upset with himself.

"I need to get back to work asap. Can I ask you to play the host until I’m able to get away?” he asked Hannibal casually.

“Of course,” he said sincerely, really sticking the guilt knife in and twisting it; *all you ever do is act like an asshole, and he’s the only one that puts up with your bullshit no matter what.*

“Oh and if...no *when* she tries to tell you any embarrassing childhood stories,” Will said wryly, “I’d rather you turned down the offer, for the sake of my sanity.”

“I will do my best to resist the temptation,” Hannibal said, eyes dancing with humour.

And for a moment too long, Will found himself staring at the man, before his eyes hurried away, out over the room, blinking. Hands on his hips, Will nodded, feeling like an idiot, muttered a quick *'see you later'* and then strode from the house.

Around him, the world stretched out like a chess board. *All black and white squares, waiting to be filled as he saw fit* . Manoeuvring people for his own ends, watching the web pull tighter and tighter until everything clicked together, was something uniquely satisfying for someone who had lived as long as he had. A long game played across time as he sat by and watched, while mere mortals danced on their threads like bobbing flies.

Yet, at times, it was the flukes that were the most precious. The things he couldn’t control or predict, plummeting through his world like pebbles in a mill pond, *the ripples forming, colliding, making waves that could threaten to tumble his carefully erected fortress.* They were the most enjoyable delights to deal with, *keep his instincts sharp* . And this one, he was sure, had come at a wonderfully opportune moment.

Pouring coffee for Abigail first, then for Elder Robicheaux, Hannibal smiled politely as he watched the witches talk. *Hannah, as Will had introduced her, was an efficient and manipulative woman. In*

only a few minutes, she had managed to talk Abigail down from flighty and ready to flee, to a more subdued and curious state of mind. Hannibal could appreciate her technique, subtle but kind smiles, a deep and resonant tone, and quick but effective verbal cues whenever Abigail showed signs of tension. It was entertaining to observe, if nothing else.

“Why did you...come to see me?” Abigail asked hesitantly, finally crawling out of her shell.

“You are the thirteenth,” Hannah said to Abigail, smiling when Abigail frowned; the older woman cast her eyes kindly to Hannibal, as if to include him, “you see, each coven holds thirteen members at any given time. It’s a strong number, any more or any less and the coven is vulnerable. There are many rituals that can only be cast with a perfect thirteen.”

“But I thought,” Abigail frowned, but looked as if she didn’t want to carry on, “I mean...isn’t Will the thirteenth? I thought I heard him say...”

“It’s complicated,” Hannah said, motherly tone almost sugary, “we’ll have plenty of time to talk about it later. I’m sure Will would want to explain it himself; if he finds out I’ve told you, I’ll get the nosy old lady treatment,” when she laughed, Abigail ducked her head, “oh, and speaking of nosy,” Hannah said, turning to him with an almost conspiratorial air.

Nothing but a small, old woman with kind, brown eyes. Unassuming and ineffectual. That’s what he was sure others saw, *but not him.* To him her eyes were sharp and clear, hiding a power behind wrinkled hands and ruby painted lips. Just as she opened her mouth, Hannibal beat her to the punch.

“**Abigail**,” he said softly, exerting his power, “**I understand you are tired, my dear. It has been a taxing day for you**.”

“I’m...” for a second she looked as if she would argue, and then suddenly yawned, *his words taking effect,* “yeah, I guess.”

“**Perhaps it would be best if you went upstairs and got some rest**.”

“Ok,” she nodded, following his instructions perfectly; before she left, she turned and gave a brief nod to the woman still sat on the couch, followed by a, “it was nice meeting you.”

They both sat in silence as the sound of footsteps shuffled away, then climbed the stairs. Sniffing, Hannibal sat back, crossing his legs. Robicheaux didn’t acknowledge the change in atmosphere, even when the door snapped closed upstairs. He watched her finish her coffee, and then set the mug down delicately on the table.

“Well, this is certainly becoming a walk down memory lane,” Hannibal said flippantly, “I am beginning to wonder who will pop up next.”

“How can you...?” Robicheaux stopped, swallowing, before levelling a penetrating gaze in his direction; *it was somewhat refreshing and nostalgic to come into contact with another venerable mind,* “I had hoped I was wrong. I really did.”

“Should I be offended?”

“...Almost didn’t believe it. When you opened the door...” she said eventually, sounding far less composed than she had since he had allowed her into his home; Hannibal wondered if her

composure had been an act she had put on, or if perhaps this was the act now. He would need to be careful around her, that much was clear, "...you look exactly the same. Exactly as I remember you."

"I thought perhaps you might not," he said casually, "although, I suppose I was not planning to cross paths with you again. Therefore, my expectations were somewhat arbitrary. May I say you are a fine actress? Youre reaction to my introduction was exemplary."

"Why are you here?" she asked, face stony, eyes hard.

"I live here," he answered facetiously.

"Don't get clever with me," she said, voice tight, "what are you doing with Will? All this time and not a hint, not a word, and now suddenly you're here, meddling. I had thought it was a mutual understanding you were to leave him be..."

"It is not myself you should be worried about," he cut in; she stopped short, eyeing him like a tiger in the grass. Lips pursed, Hannibal tipped his head to the right, "I am here for Will's benefit, not for anything untoward. That night," he said, noting her tense up, "it was not my plan to hurt you, or your coven. My design was my own, the target itself was utterly arbitrary."

For a moment, Robicheaux looked stricken by an anger he couldn't begin to fathom, "She died because of..." then she snapped her mouth shut, glaring; slowly, a smile slid onto her lips and she tilted her head back, watching him down the length of her fine nose, "I hope you are not planning to intimidate me," *and in those dark eyes was a fire, slow and burning, like an ancient beacon across a dark plateau, "I know* what you are."

If he listened, he thought he might be able to hear the mutter of unknown words, humming on the air like background static. *Magic resonating with and fighting against his own power.* As they sat still, he was sure an outside observer would never have known of the battle happening around them, *like invisible hands clasping, pushing, pulling, scratching.*

"Oh?" Hannibal smiled, charmed by the thought that she would deign to know him, "Is that so?"

"I did my research. It was difficult, but you'd be surprised what some people are willing to spill when you apply the right pressure."

"I suppose I should be impressed, that you were able to procure the knowledge, but honestly I'm more interested," he sat forwards, hands clasped, "to know if you are aware of what *he* is."

"He?" she asked, feigning confusion with a raised brow.

"Our darling Will," he smiled as she scowled haughtily.

"Then you don't know yourself," she said, as if speaking to herself alone, "I suppose I should find your dismissive malice horrifying. But in the end it seems somewhat pedestrian."

"It is one of my favourite things," Hannibal smiled, "being underestimated. But then this is perhaps how you found yourself in trouble in the first place. You didn't keep a good enough watch on your sisters, did you my dear."

The comment was expected to make her pale in anger, though it was equally as interesting to see her pale in fright.

“Does he know? About what you did?” she asked, a touch of worry leaking through her guarded visage, “Will?”

“Of course not,” Hannibal scoffed, “I’m not that cruel.”

“Could have fooled me," she said accusingly, eyes hardening.

“I tend to have that affect,” Hannibal said, nonchalant; after a small pause, he stood, brushing down his suit, “I am sure that my past record with your esteemed self will not stem your suspicion. If you like, I can offer you proof.”

“And why should I believe anything you would show me?”

“Because,” he said, smiling, “it’s not me who will show you. If you are amenable, there is someone you might like to meet with much more...” he searched for the word, “ *motivation* to tell the truth. Shall we?”

It was pleasant, the calmness and arrogant unwillingness to her gait. She followed him like a proud prisoner led to the gallows. Through in the kitchen, Hannibal stood by the door to the dining room and ran his hand along a wooden panel, finding the small notch at the back. A piece came away with a push, leaving the button beneath free to be pressed. A soft *click* sounded by the butcher’s block. She watched him like a lioness from the grass as he crouched down on the floor to reveal a small horizontal cylinder with a digital read-out in the wooden flooring. Inputting the correct code, a large part of the floor slid away, revealing a set of steep stairs.

The last time he’d shown anyone his hidden lair, it had been Bedelia. She hadn’t been exactly thrilled that he was keeping it on-site, so to speak, but then Bedelia liked her meat prepared away from where she was living. *Don’t shit where you eat,* she would tell him in the usual uncouth manner she reserved for scorning him. Still, he found it far more convenient to have his meals close to home.

“I can help you down, if you like,” he said.

She was staring at the hatchway with resigned trepidation, “...No need.”

“As you wish.”

He allowed her to descend first, following behind by a few steps. When she reached the bottom of the stairway, Hannibal reached up to flick a switch that illuminated everything as a set of strip lights pinged and fluttered into life. *Above them, the hatchway slid back into place.* As he watched, she stayed utterly still; eventually he walked past her, towards the woman laying flat on the gurney, arms and legs fitted with tight restraints. The Amenuensis looked far worse than she had when he had last left her; skin pale, almost translucent, and eyes dark and heavily ringed, her breathing quiet and shallow.

As he reached out to brush the hair from her face, he heard Robicheaux let out a sound of disgust. The witch looked as if she might be considering doing something about it, this bizarre and hideous thing he had shown her. That she did not was telling in itself.

“She is not in any pain,” Hannibal explained, as if it might soften the blow; looking to her, the Elder witch did not return his gaze, instead staring at the helpless woman. For a moment he thought she might cry out for help, but something appeared to hold her back, “though, after you hear what she has to say, you might wish that she was. I find myself feeling rather generous today. I could offer you that sort of recompense afterwards, if you’d like.”

“I don’t inflict pain for the sake of it,” she bit out each word, glaring at him.

“Those who throw stones shouldn’t live in glass houses,” Hannibal said, raising a brow; a silence between them, and then Hannibal pushed a little further, “I like to think that every person on this planet has the ability to change at any time, even the kindest and wisest of us, depending on the right sort of circumstance. We are all vulnerable. You, for example,” he said, beckoning her forwards; reluctantly, she began to step towards him until she was peering down at Dr. Unger, a look on her face as if she were smelling something unpleasant, “you are responsible for so many lives. But Will, he is special to you. As he is special to me.”

She looked to him, eyes haunted by what she was seeing, *but also by what she had seen, so long ago when they had first met.*

“We both have our pressure points,” he said as he readied a needle, flicking it before he slid it into the canula on the back of Unger’s hand; the woman began to rouse from her vacant state, eyes becoming aware, mouth moving like a guppy, “it’s just an odd coincidence that we happen to share one. Now,” he said, smiling, “would you like to hear the awful truth?”

Waiting until Robicheaux nodded, quick and jerky, mouth set as if she was appalled at herself for even being here, watching this, Hannibal smiled softly and addressed the Aman.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Unger. I have someone here who would like to talk to you.”

Returning to Quantico was almost comical at this point. Will listened to Crawford rant and felt detached. *His life was becoming a litany of shit, from one pile to the next.* Once his payment was given, by way of half-hearted apology, he had sought out the team, currently sitting in the main conference room. Just the two of them, Beverly and Brian seated at a table in the centre of the large room while all other chairs and tables were pulled to the walls haphazardly; made them seem like a little life raft afloat at sea.

As he joined them, pulling up a chair, Will wondered who would be the first to be eaten, when the food supply ran out.

“Give as good as you got?” Beverly asked.

“You heard that, huh?” Will sighed, thinking of how loud Jack liked to be when berating his subordinates, “yeah, well...I guess I’m used to it. Any luck contacting the MCV?”

“Got a representative,” Brian, lounging back in his chair and looking fed up as he flipped a coin with his thumb, catching it quickly, a practiced movement, “they said they’d get someone to call me back who could help out.”

“Great,” Will said, unable to hold back the sarcasm, “not holding my breath.”

“Where did *you* go?” Beverly asked, brow raised.

“My mother...visited,” Will shrugged, noting Beverly’s interest, “is visiting, I mean. I had to...” he hesitated, “take her to a hotel.”

“Oh yeah?” Brian smirked, thankfully less interested, “condolences.”

“Shut up, Brian,” Beverly rolled her eyes, “not everyone has mommy issues.”

When the door opened, all three sets of eyes swung towards the excitement. Luckily Jimmy was immune to apathy, striding in with a smile on his face and a tablet in his hands. Next to him, Brian groaned and rubbed at his face, slouching back into his chair.

“Come to join the utterly fucked club?” he asked as Jimmy pulled up a chair, dragging it across the floor with a screech.

Will grimaced at the sound. Jimmy sat down and placed the tablet flat in front of him, grinning, “Sounds like a great club. How’d I get a membership?”

“Working for Crawford is qualification enough,” Will said wryly, watching as Jimmy began pulling up photographs on the tablet, “I was told you had something?”

“Actually, it’s something I’m missing,” Jimmy shrugged; *as he cycled through, Will leaned in and watched. Every seal they had discovered so far were flitting past, like a rogue’s gallery,* “anyone want to make a guess?”

“Does it looked like any of us want to guess?” Brian asked tiredly, while rubbing at his face.

“You’re a killjoy, you know that?” Jimmy said despairingly; waiting for another couple of beats, he threw his hands up and sat back, “Missing something? Come on! We’re five for six on the seals Will tracked down.”

“For six?” Will frowned, “What six? The hell are you getting at..?”

“The one place we don’t have a seal from. I was thinking about it earlier; we were so focused in on interpreting the thing, and then I realised,” Jimmy said, looking up excitedly, “we’re missing the most interesting one.”

“Will you get to the *point* ,” Beverly sighed.

“Miriam,” Jimmy said, hands to the side, palms up, “Miriam Lass.”

Staring, Will felt suddenly struck. *And a little ill.* As Jimmy continued, he didn’t seem to notice Will’s hands curl to fists. Out the corner of his eye, he noticed Brian looking at him askance.

“She’s the only one they took, all the others were simply harvested,” Jimmy said casually, “I’d be interested to know...”

“Can it, Jimmy,” Brian said tightly.

“But this is...”

“I said *can it* .”

“No,” Will cut in, swallowing; there was a tense pause, “he’s right. He is. Jimmy,” purposefully thinking about it, forcing himself to think about it . *How did you fucking miss this?* He chastised himself as he came to the obvious conclusion, “you think her seal might be tripped.”

“Exactly,” Jimmy said, his excitement somewhat quashed by the tense atmosphere, “there has to be a reason she was taken. These killings are ritualistic in nature.”

“Then we go to Miriam’s apartment, see if we can find the seal there,” Brian said, sitting forwards.

“Jack won’t let us,” Will said with certainty, remembering how cagey Crawford had been about the other checks Will had wanted to run.

“Then we...I don’t know, but we have to try,” Price pushed, “Maybe they thought they’d found what they were looking for when they found your partner...”

“Couldn't wait for me, huh Price?”

Looking up, no-one seemed completely surprised to see Crawford standing in the doorway, but neither did they seem entirely happy about it. Which Will found interesting for two reasons. *One:* he’d been at odds with the team since he’d started, and even though he’d become closer with Beverly and Brian it had never been sympatico, until now. *And two* : it was nice to see other people finally realise there was some bullshit going down that needed addressing.

Walking into the room, Jack didn’t bother to grab himself a chair, instead standing over them as if it meant something.

“So,” Jack said when everyone remained suspiciously quiet, “what was so important that you got us all together.”

A pause, in which Jimmy flashed his gaze across the silent group, before sniffing with a shrug, “I realised there had been an oversight,” Will almost smirked at Price’s overly formal word choice, which he only ever pulled out when he was intent to put himself on an equal footing with a superior, “in our gathering of evidence.”

“Oh?” Jack asked.

“Miriam Lass’s apartment,” Brian spoke up, tapping the table, “we haven’t been back to look for the seal there.”

“And you won’t be.”

Beverly looked up sharply, “But why? Surely there would have to be a seal there too.”

“I already have the Registry half way up my ass on a good day,” Jack started, eyes dark, “but now, because of the rise in corpses connected to this case I have the Inspector General’s Office jammed down my throat, as if the pair of them are intent to meet each other somewhere in the middle! And I would have thought by now that I wouldn’t need to explain my decisions to you like a cheap date. Lass is off limits, understand?”

“I don’t need your half assed protection, Jack,” Will drawled.

“And I’d appreciate it if you weren’t so egotistical to think this damn investigation revolves around your sensibilities, Graham,” Jack bit back, “now I’m not paying you to sit around and make nice.

Get to work."

No one spoke as they stood, and no one mentioned the fact that Will wasn't moving with them, *still seated tightly in his chair* . Jack let them leave, one by one, until it was only the two of them left. Will tried to stop grinding his teeth together, but it wasn't easy.

"You know," he said slowly, "if I didn't know any better, Jack, considering you seem pretty fucking focused on finding this group of killers, I'd worry about the fact that all you've done since this started is make it especially difficult for me to do my job."

"I hope that isn't a threat, Graham," Jack said, without looking at Will while he spoke, "because I am *this* close," he held his hand up, fingers almost touching, "to dragging your sorry ass to Chilton's doorstep and handing you the fuck over. You say I've hindered your every move, when you know fine well all you've done is step all over my toes since you got here because you think you're *fucking* special. If you undermine me *one* more time, I won't be responsible for your new accommodation," putting his hands on the table Jack leaned down and stared at him stonily, "This is my investigation, and what I say, goes. Do I make myself clear?"

Licking his lips Will smiled grimly, eyes focusing somewhere around Jack's tie knot, and even though he felt a slick, hot jolt of violence try and tear its way up and out of his mouth, all he said in the end was, "Crystal, Jack. Crystal."

He knew he should have driven straight back to Hannibal's. He knew he should have been desperate to speak to Hannah, seek guidance, make sure she wasn't embarrassing the fuck out of him, or even intimidating Abigail. Knew he should have done the right thing by all of them, all of these people whose lives were being affected by him and his poor fucking judgement but...

But he couldn't. He just *couldn't* right now.

"Well, this is unexpected," Alana Bloom had answered the door looking less than glamorous, but he loved her all the more because of it; *hair up in a messy bun, no make-up, wearing an oversized flannel shirt and old jeans, and half sopping wet and streaked in mud.*

"What the fuck happened to you?" Will asked, even though he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

"Well, Peanut thought it would be a great idea to play pig in the mud-hole at the park," Alana said, standing back to let him in as she brushed away some bubbles still stuck to her shirt, "and Lenny joined her. I've spent the last half hour scrubbing dogs."

"Shit," Will couldn't help but laugh, which somewhat undermined the apology, "sorry."

"Sure," she said wryly, "give me a minute, I'm gonna get changed. Make yourself at home."

He wouldn't lie, it was fantastic to see the mutts. *Better than medicine.* The first one there, as always, was Buster, scampering little paws rounding the corner, standing to alert, and then rushing at him with the energy of fifteen suns. While he grinned and tried to catch the little Jack Russell as it went crazy around his ankles, Angel rounded the corner tail wagging, dancing on her massive paws, then Rusty, coming to sit next to him and push her face up into his hand, whining, and Bailey the Maltese doing circus spins, yipping in delight. By the time Lenny appeared, short fur still wet, mouth lolling open, ears back, Will felt almost all the way back towards human again.

“Looks like you needed that,” Will heard Alana say from somewhere above him as he roughhoused with the dogs, fending off licking tongues and trying to quiet barks.

“Well, what responsible pet owner doesn’t- *oh come on Lenny, down for fuck’s sake...* what pet owner doesn’t come to visit his hounds on lunch break,” he smiled off- handedly , glancing up from his crouch on the floor; *it didn’t last when he noticed her eyes: cautious and keen.*

"Bit late for a lunch break,” she said calmly.

“Uh, yeah, I guess,” Will floundered, “thanks. For looking after them I mean.”

“Of course,” she shrugged, *now dressed in blue hoodie and black trousers* , “though I'd appreciate it if we didn’t have to do the song and dance routine every time you come by. Last time we ran through the numbers I nearly kicked you out of here for good.”

“I remember,” Will nodded, looking contrite.

“Then don’t disappoint me, Graham,” she said, *and he knew she meant it* , “why are you really here?”

A short pause. Will sniffed, standing up and giving his most over-exuberant dogs the stare to keep them from jumping up.

“I...well. Hannah’s come to visit.”

“She *has* ,” Alana’s brows disappeared into her hairline, “your Elder? I thought she never left Louisiana.”

“She doesn’t,” Will shrugged, chewing at his bottom lip, “didn’t even tell me she was coming. Just appeared on my fucking doorstep.”

“Is anything wrong?” Alana frowned, “I mean, I know that’s kind of a dumb question, it’s just...well, I thought she only visited her kids when there was trouble.”

And for a moment, he considered not showing her. *If he was being honest, it was mostly because he didn’t want to see it, didn’t want to acknowledge it* . But one look at her was all it took, with her no-nonsense stare . *Remembering the days and days spent in that small, white room at the Asylum, with only Alana’s soothing voice coaxing him back to the real world* . Will absorbed it in, standing up straight and fetching the manilla envelope from the counter where he’d dropped it.

“I need to ask a favour.”

“Ok-ay,” she said, elongating the word, eyes skipping down to the folder in his hands.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy...”

“More than usual?” she joked.

“...but someone left this for me anonymously, in my fucking work car, and I’m...” saying the words seemed ridiculous, except for the fact that they were true, “scared of what’s in here.”

“Will...” Alana frowned concernedly, “what are you talking about?”

“I don’t know,” he swallowed, feeling suddenly panicked, “I don’t know, but it’s...can we just have a look at it? I don’t want to do this on my own.”

“Sure,” she said, unable to stop the worried frown ruffling her brow, “I’m going to put coffee on. You want a coffee?”

“I’d fucking love a coffee.”

And it was bizarre, working through it all with Alana, but at least less stressful than doing this alone. *She was possessed of a very systematic and logical mind, and that helped create a layer of impersonality between himself and the strange information inside the envelope.* Mainly photographs, some of people he didn’t know, some of the members of his coven, some of him when he was young. Then there were police reports of a kidnapping, but the names had been redacted. Some pages that appeared to be torn out of a book, detailing some Eastern European mythology of tutelary deities, *Boginka, Leshy, Moroz*.

As they rifled through it, separating things out into piles, it was disconcerting to him that Alana ended up fascinated by the same photograph that had caught his eye earlier.

Hannah, the two twins, and the fourth woman; and on the back ‘already pregnant ’.

“I mean,” Alana said cautiously, eyes flicking up to him, then back to the photo, “it’s not just me, right? She looks...”

“A lot like me, I know,” Will bit out; *because she did, and the more he’d looked at it the worse it got.*

“Do you think...?”

“I don’t know. I *don’t know* .”

“Will. You told me you never knew your mom, right?”

Said out in the open, the word stung even more than it had when trapped only in his mind. *Mother* . Until now it had only ever been a young boy’s fantasy, or a moniker he applied to Hannah regardless of their lack of blood attachment. As far as he was concerned Hannah was his mom, and the thought of a biological mother had been something he’d grown out of over time. He’d heard the story from her lips so many times he could probably recite it from memory.

She'd shown up at the coven, weary and desperate, fleeing something she never divulged to any of the sisters. It wasn’t completely unreasonable, because it happened from time to time; young pregnant women seeking refuge within the safety of the magical circle. A senior witch took an oath of sanctuary when they were ready to become Elders, and they didn’t ask questions like government officials did. His mother had shown up at the coven so close to labour that they’d barely been able to get her in the door before her waters had broken. They’d done their best, but Hannah said that some people were fated to pass on. When she was feeling sentimental, she would tell him that his mother died giving him the last of her strength, because she’d wanted him to live.

“She left it for you,” Hannah had told him .

“What d’you mean?” he had asked.

“ *Your mama, sweetheart. She gave you your name right before she passed away. Will Graham. Who was I to change that?”*

And I believed every word, Will thought to himself as he took the photograph from Alana and stared at it accusingly. The woman wasn’t classically beautiful, but she was stunning. Had a commanding air about her. Hair in chocolate waves, grey eyes piercing, a proud face and full lips.

“Do you really think this might be her?” Alana pressed him carefully.

“...Hannah told me she didn’t know my mother. That she was a runaway, and that my dad was already gone. That she died giving birth to me,” Will knew he sounded blank, but he couldn’t rectify the change, “if this is her...it’s a fucking massive coincidence that Hannah shows up right as this all gets dumped in my lap, don’t you think?”

“I mean, we could be wrong. You don’t even know what any of this is, where it came from, *who* it came from...”

“You saw it too.”

“What?”

“I said you saw it too,” Will said, staring at Alana intensely, the woman sighing, “I didn’t even tell you anything and you thought just like I did. Does it matter where it came from? I look just fucking like her Alana.”

“...I know,” she nodded, running a frustrated hand through her hair, “shit.”

“Too fucking right,” Will said, throwing the photograph down into the pile with the others.

Sitting forwards, elbows on the table, fingers to his mouth, Will Graham thought back to forty minutes in the past and decided to regret the moment he had considered not showing her...and wondered if he’d made the wrong choice. *Looking at the empty envelope like he thought Pandora might have after she opened the box, except even she had hope to cling to.*

“What are you going to do?” Alana asked softly.

“Didn’t exactly think that far ahead,” Will admitted.

“I’d say I was shocked, but I know you too well.”

“Thanks for that.”

“Will, I mean it though,” she said, catching his eye, “someone wanted you to see this, but for who’s benefit?”

“I should confront her,” Will said, shaking his head; Alana looked like she wanted to interject, but held herself back, “but I don’t want to. I just wish...she would tell me the truth herself, you know? I don’t care what it is, I just want her to *tell me* . And if it’s something I can’t handle, well,” he sighed, “that she hid it from me all this time is only going to make it worse.”

Not for the first time, Will wished he could have stood it if Alana leaned in and hugged him like he knew she wanted to.

It had been a mutual understanding, in the end. Delightfully so, almost business-like. Hannibal appreciated that level of professionalism in his associates. It made life run smooth, like clockwork. So when he had booked a hotel, nothing too grand but also nothing too sordid, and sent Hannah Robicheaux on her way to her new accommodation, the mutual understanding had kept his world in order.

Things would remain in the status quo until his plan was finalised. Because without it, Will would be at risk. And he couldn't have that. No. Will was too valuable to allow a bunch of shrieking incompetents like Chilton and his miserable brigade near him. Luckily, it appeared Elder Robicheaux also agreed with his assessment. Whether logically or sentimentally, either was viable but it made no difference to him which she had chosen.

Watching the Uber pick up the little, old woman and whisk her away, Hannibal thought he might still be able to feel her gaze upon him. Though it was difficult to tell whether it was a feeling or a true magic. *Was she still observing him?* He wondered as he watched a new car pull up into his driveway. In the end it would make little difference. He had nothing to hide from her. Her lips were sealed.

He stood in the doorway of his house and watched, a soft smile cemented onto his face, as Freddie Lounds emerged from the rather run-down silver hatchback. She was an intriguing creature, Hannibal thought to himself as she walked up the path, fierce but skittish, strong but submissive. As she walked up the steps she slowed, as if finally realising she was observed.

"The delightful Miss Lounds," he greeted.

"Don't try and sweet talk me," she said jadedly, visage unimpressed, "I did what you wanted. I gave Graham the evidence."

"And you came all the way here to tell me in person. I am honoured."

"Don't flatter yourself. I wanted to make sure you understood I'd paid my debt. It's over now."

When his smile widened, he could see her try and hold her nerve. It was entertaining, if nothing else.

"Oh Freddie, now I know you are not so naïve."

"I'm not your maid, Dr. Lecter. We're *even* ."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news," he said as a chill wind sent her curls into disarray, forcing her to pull up the stubby collar of her coat to try and keep herself warm, "but I have no intention of allowing that one paltry action to, as you so delightfully put it, *pay your debt* ."

She looked like she might want to run, but the clever survivor in her knew that it would be futile.

"I have some information I would like you to feed back to Agent Crawford, in place of your usual reports."

"You think I'd stick my neck out for you to double cross the *FBI?"* she scoffed.

"I think you will do as I say because if not I will show Jack Crawford you've been playing both teams."

That snapped her mouth shut. When he pulled a small flash-drive from his pocket and handed it to her, there was only a moment's hesitation before it was snatched. She put it in her purse as if it were a small, dead animal she didn't want to touch. As she turned to go he let out a small tut, drawing a baleful glare.

"Did I say you could leave?"

Her lips were a thin line, but she purported herself professionally. *He really did appreciate it after all.*

"I would like you to find me the identity of this man," he said, handing her the photo he'd taken from his CCTV of his new client, "and come back to me as soon as you can."

"No," she said as she stared at the photo in shock, before looking up and noting the dangerous narrowing of his eyes; she balked, hurrying to qualify with, "no, I mean I don't need to come back to you. I know who this is."

"You do," Hannibal said, tipping his head a little to the left.

"He was the one who gave me my...incentive, to spy on you and Graham. His name is Budge. Tobias Budge," she said, giving him a significant look.

"And here I thought you didn't know who had hired you," Hannibal said, tone like razor-wire.

"I *don't* know who hired me," she spat, brow raised, "Budge is an errand boy. I could tell just by looking at him. I don't know who he works for. I looked him up after he strong armed me," her stare became significant, "I always do my research on the people that force me into P.I. work."

"Well," Hannibal grinned, making Lounds' confidence waver, "I'm sure whatever you find will be very interesting reading."

Chapter End Notes

"Ceangailte agus Ceangailteacha, Ceangailteacha Ceangailte. Féach an Radharc, Éist leis an bhFuaim. Cad a cailleadh, Faightear anois."
Binding and Binding, Binding, Binding. See the Scene, Listen to the Sound. What was lost, is now found.

"in ainm Brigid"
In the name of Brigid (Goddess of Healers, Poets, Smiths, Childbirth, Inspiration, Fire, Hearth and a patron of warfare)

"Sinsear"
Elder/Ancestor

Penumbra

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The pizza box was hot against his hand as he balanced it, slipping his wrist further through the carrier bag so he could knock against the door without spilling dinner everywhere. It took a couple of goes to get a response, the vague sounds of 'coming, coming!' accompanying thumping footsteps.

"Bout time," he said, foisting the box into her surprised hands as he hurried inside, "I'm fucking freezing and my hand is on fire. What the hell were you up to?"

Miriam Lass didn't look impressed, but neither did she look surprised. Hair up in a messy bun and swamped by a large, cable-knit cardigan, she shrugged while kicking playfully at him.

"Get your ass in the living room. I've got the radiators on full."

She wasn't lying. Part of him knew the room was too hot, but the frozen core of his being was in heaven as he walked in and dumped the bag of beers, chocolate and chips he'd bought on impulse, down by the sofa. Pushing in behind him Miriam grinned, closing the door with a snap and pulling off her cardigan.

"Gimme your coat, or you're going to regret it," she said, hand out.

"It's like the fucking tropics in here," he said, shimmying out of his jacket and passing it off, "should have brought ice for cocktails instead of pizza."

"That does sound good, but neither of us would have been up for work tomorrow if you'd brought a bag of booze," he heard her say as she hauled the bags and the food through to the small kitchen, the sound of drawers opening and closing.

"I did *bring a bag of booze," Will shrugged, smiling, "after what you pulled? I need a fucking drink."*

No answer. Will didn't push it. Falling down into the large armchair by the coffee table he sighed, relaxing down until he felt the heat melt his aching muscles. From the next room, he could hear Miriam's mind working, the guilt mixing with the anger mixing with the resentment...

"Could you keep it down through there?" Will muttered loudly, "I came over here to relax."

"Oh yeah?" she shot back, "Then why'd you even bring it up. And I've told you the rules. No peeking in my head, Graham."

"Sorry," he said half-heartedly, "force of habit. And it wasn't your fault."

"I don't want to talk about it," she said, reappearing with the pizza box which she dumped onto the table with unnecessary force, shoving an opened beer in his face; Will took it gingerly, careful not to touch her skin while she was angry, he didn't need a shock connection right now.

“Yeah, well maybe I want to,” Will said, looking up at her, catching her eye; she hesitated, “you any idea how fucking tiring it is to work with you when you’re pissed off? It’s all I can hear. I can’t concentrate.”

“Great, so I’m making you mad at me now too?” she said tightly.

“No, christ, that’s not what I meant,” Will said, frustrated, sitting up and putting his beer down on the table with a clack *, “I just wanted to say I agree with you, alright. I do. There’s definitely something crazy and sketchy going on at the Registry...”*

“Right?” she butted in, unable to hold back, eyes narrowed, “I mean, we barely got to see the last body before they requisitioned it and now there’s no sign of it at all?”

“Yeah, I said I agreed with y-..."

“It’s bullshit. And then I call Jack out on it and he can’t even give me a straight answer...”

“Miriam, for fuck’s sake I...”

"Taking the political stance and getting mad because I put it in my official report, now we’re screwed...”

“Jesus, will you let me speak!” Will cursed out, forcing Lass to fold her arms and bite her lip; sighing, Will scratched at his face and tried to be as diplomatic as possible, “yes we’re fucked but...I think you did the right thing, ok?”

She stood, chewing the inside of her lip, avoiding his eyes. He waited, because he could feel her hesitating, knowing that he had to leave the decision up to her. One thing he’d learned since becoming her partner, there was no coercing Lass into anything she didn’t want to do. Sometimes even if it meant believing in herself.

“Enough that it makes up for Jack putting us in the Archives for the foreseeable future?”

“Yeah,” Will shrugged, “you know me. I’m used to being treated like shit,” he ignored her unamused snort of derision, “and anyway, this is clearly important to you.”

“Will...” she said, cautionary.

“I didn’t peek in your head, fuck’s sake,” he said, rubbing at his eyes, “it’s obvious, that’s all. This is important to you. Fuck, it’s important to me *too, alright?”*

Another pause, another silence, but this time, when he looked up, she was smiling a little sadly. Then a laugh broke her lips, and she shook her head, sitting down heavily on the sofa. Will frowned.

“Jesus, Will, for a psychic you’re so clueless sometimes.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“It doesn’t mean that much to me, you idiot. It means a lot to me because *it means a lot to you, ok?”*

He wanted to say something, something that would break the sudden, cloying feeling of trust and compassion that were trying to fight their way through and latch onto him, hooks digging deep. Sitting forwards with his elbows on his knees, Will rubbed at his face, then ran his fingers through his hair and sighed.

"I don't need you to fight my battles for me."

"Yeah, well maybe I want to."

"Shit," he muttered, lips scrunching together before he let out a pent-up breath, "...thanks."

"The magic word," she grinned, "now you get to have some pizza."

"You were gonna take away the pizza I *brought you if I didn't say thank you?" Will raised a brow.*

"And the beer. And maybe kick you out," she said, making a show of musing over further ideas of punishment.

"Ah fuck off," Will threw a cushion at her, clearing his throat of the emotion trying to give him away, "are we watching this movie or not?"

They were half way through a movie Will admittedly wasn't paying much attention to, had seen it too many times, when the scratching started. Will took a swig of beer, frowning as Miriam leapt up.

"The hell are you going? This is the best bit."

"I didn't think she'd be awake," Miriam was saying, smiling to herself as she padded quietly on socked feet.

"She? What the hell are you talking about 'she'?"

"Well," she said, looking genuinely happy, "I may have overreacted to our demotion a little rashly more than just wanting pizza and beer...I got myself a pet."

"A pet?" *Will said, sounding unconvinced; when Miriam raised a brow and smiled, Will gave her a look, "You're serious? Your landlord is gonna hang, draw and quarter you."*

"Ah, screw him," she said with a wave of her hand, "like he even cares. Hasn't fixed the draughty windows, or dealt with the damp stains, so I," she disappeared into the kitchen and Will heard a door opening, "picked myself up a cat."

Watching, Will chewed slowly on a slice of pizza as a ginger cat pawed its way into the room timidly. It was scraggly, and its fur a little matted, with a very impressive set of green eyes. On spying him it stopped dead still, stared, and then backed out between Miriam's legs and stalked back into the kitchen.

And for a distinct moment, Will honestly thought he could hear the cat think:

Fuck

But the moment passed, and Will blinked, and all he could see was a retreating tail and then it was gone. All he could think was that it must have been Miriam he'd overheard.

“Oh, sweetie, it’s ok,” Miriam was saying, trying to coax the cat back out, “come on, he won’t hurt you.”

“Picked yourself up a cat, huh?” he said, unimpressed, shaking off the concern, “What you meant to say was you got a stray off the street.”

“You know, coming from you that’s rich,” she said flatly, “considering the number of mutts you’ve grabbed off the kerb.”

“Stray dogs are different from stray cats,” he shrugged, “and I’ve got experience,” she shot him a dirty look, and he raised his eyebrows, “just don’t come crying to me when you’re cleaning lacerations with iodine.”

“She likes me *,” Miriam ribbed, “anyway, I’ve got to have something to make me feel better considering we got demoted because I championed a cause for* you.”

“Oh here we go,” Will rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help but laugh as Miriam began mock complaining about the trouble Will had apparently gotten them into.

“You still can’t get a hold of any information on her?” Will asked, annoyed.

The headlights passing by in the gloom were blinding, *stabbing into his brain.* Taking a hand off the wheel he rummaged in his pocket, pulling out a strip of paracetamol, cracking the pills into his mouth. They were bitter on the tongue, washed away with some lukewarm orange juice. *It all sat uneasily in his gut, like a wriggling open can of worms.*

“Nothing concrete,” Zeller’s voice went quiet, then the sound of a phone ruffling across fabric and a muffled ‘ *can I just use my card? Thanks’* , before the sound became clear again, “sorry. I was at the checkout. Gees, you seen the evening headlines? They’re all raving about some sighting of a giant out over the estate at the river,” the sound of rustling newspaper and footsteps, “Some blurry ass photographs and everything. Looks like the Registry have had to make a statement calling it a hoax.”

“I don’t read the tabloids,” Will said dryly, “can we get back to Unger?”

“Right, yeah, sorry. Unger. I tried everything I could think of, but honestly? It sounds like she isn’t there.”

“Isn’t there? The fuck does that mean?”

“I just...look give me a second,” Zeller said, keeping his voice down; *there was the sound of plastic bags and a car door closing, and then...* “I mean I don’t know what you thought they’d reasonably give me. The Registry is harder to get info on than a President’s mistress. Most information about the Registry is published on their own website, they’re obligated to publish their financial data, names of the board of directors, that kind of stuff, but beyond that it’s all putting on a big show for the public, making them sound like the saviours of humanity. They’re not a government body, they’re a private company, they aren’t obliged to air their dirty laundry; and the rest is restricted information. I don’t have access.”

Biting at his lip, Will frowned, “Wait, if you didn’t get any information then why do you think she isn’t there?” Will asked.

“The guy who answered the phone.”

“What?”

“The receptionist,” Zeller clarified, “he mentioned you. Think you made an impression on him.”

“Uh, yeah. I guess,” Will sighed, remembering his shameless flirting.

“Well, whatever you did he remembered you. And he said something interesting.”

“Oh yeah?”

“ *Tell Will I won’t be able to make him any appointments with the Aman for a while.* He sounded disappointed. And then he gave me his number to pass on to you. You want it?”

“No,” Will said, clearing his throat, “thanks. I just...it’s odd. I’ve never heard of an Amanuensis being outside of the Registry. I thought they were live in employees. I mean they can’t exactly function in normal society.”

“I mean, neither have I, but I guess it must happen sometimes. But it’s a bit fucking convenient timing isn’t it? The moment we want to speak to her, she’s no longer available.”

“Agreed,” Will said, pulling up into Lecter’s driveway; there was a pause, “Look, Brian...”

“You’re going to Lass’s apartment, aren’t you.”

Will sighed, and rubbed at his face. He felt heavy, *the weight of the day crushing him like sheetrock.* It was difficult to find the energy to argue.

“...Yes.”

“Will, that’s...”

“It’s our only fucking lead!” Will found himself spitting out, “And we’re running out of time. I just read the report from the arson cases we dredged up, and fuck if there isn’t anything left at those sites, just skeletons and charred husks of houses. I’ve not even been allowed within fifty feet of Louise Hobbs, and that isn’t going to change! All we have are corpses, ashes and that fucking seal. It’s mocking us, Brian, *mocking us* . I won’t....I *won’t* let this happen again.”

“Then I’ll go with you,” Zeller offered without appearing to think about it; *which, somewhere deep down, gave Will a flutter of genuine amazement that Zeller appeared to consider him enough of a friend to risk his career on nothing but a hunch.*

“No,” Will said, hearing the beginnings of an argument and jumping in to overrule it, “I *mean* it. Jack can be a nasty piece of work when he thinks people are going against his instructions. Makes him paranoid.”

“You know, he’s not as bad as you try and paint him,” Zeller said, though Will picked up on the uncertainty in his voice.

“Well, maybe I just know him better than you do,” Will said wryly.

“And when Jack asks me where you are?” Zeller asked, sounding worried.

“Tell him the truth,” Will said as he shut off the engine, hanging up before Brian could argue any further.

By the time he'd parked he was determined, psyched up, *like someone who’d had to talk themselves into jumping off the bridge* . Not confident, but determined. Gripping the steering wheel, rolling the old leather in his hands, Will jerked up the handbrake and turned off the engine.

“It’s better this way,” he told himself, because Alana’s words kept circling his mind, *better than living in a lie.*

He wasn’t entirely sure of that yet. Sometimes, living in a lie was a way to keep the truth from swallowing you whole and digesting until the thick skin you’d built up was burned away, leaving you naked and shivering and *vulnerable.* The thought of confronting his Matron was making him feel sick, a physical roil in his gut that had him rubbing at his abdomen.

“Fuck,” he said to himself angrily, “ *fuck!* Just...just get this over with.”

Behind his eyes the headache had started, *seeping from his temples through his skull, branching, winding, roots taking hold.* Closing his eyes, Will wished he could just *rest* . *So difficult when your world was teetering on the edge, trying to fall to the floor and smash.* And he knew he was being flippant because it was the only way to keep the real world at bay. *The killers were still on the loose, Louise Hobbs was dead, Garret Hobbs was at large, and Abigail...*

Abigail . He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate. *How much longer until the corpses started rolling in again?* Not long enough, he knew that much at least. *Time, time, running out, blood on the ground, blood on his hands, never again...*

As far as Will Graham was concerned, getting out of the car at all was a big step forwards.

The room was gloomy with the curtains drawn, sleepy with the sound of soft breathing. Curled up on top of the duvet on the large bed, Abigail Hobbs slept peacefully.

Tilting his head, Hannibal surveyed her from the doorway. *A little linchpin* , he thought as he watched her back rise and fall as she breathed, *waiting to snap* . As he stepped inside the room and pushed the door to, he wondered how long it would be before she snapped, and the wheel flew apart as it spun.

A little while yet, he was sure. Just long enough.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, carefully, Hannibal looked down at her face, reaching out to brush away a stray few hairs tickling at her eye. Her nose crinkled, and she swatted at the place he had touched with a dopey hand, but her eyes never opened.

Lecter smiled.

“ *Abigail* ,” he said softly, in *his voice.*

No reply.

“ ***Abigail*** *,”* he said again, more forcefully this time.

Quick as a flash, her eyes opened. They were glassy but alert. It took her a moment to focus on him.

“What..?” she started, blinking as she pulled herself up to lean against the headboard, “Is something wrong?”

A little, sudden, unexpected spike of remembrance, like a nettle sting spreading out over his skin. Taking a moment to watch her, Hannibal let his eyes go out of focus.

Her eyes blue as the sky, and her face pale as the moon, and her lips uttering those three words: **is something wrong** ? *The memory stuck to him like tar, resurfacing only at inopportune moments. Sometimes he didn’t let it affect him. At others, he allowed the age-old feelings to rise from their depths and clutch at him like hands ready to drag him down into the deep.*

...Mischa...

“He*llo* ?” he heard Abigail saying, watching him with wary scepticism as he roused himself from his reverie, “Anyone home?”

“Apologies,” Hannibal smiled, “I was lost in thought.”

“Ok,” Abigail said, looking around the room, *as if her instincts were telling her to run.*

“I had something I wished to discuss with you,” he said, “in private.”

“Jesus, this better not be a weird sex thing,” Abigail groaned flippantly, “I knew there’d be a catch to the fancy house and buying me nice shit...”

Laughing seemed appropriate. Abigail trailed off as she watched him, now seeming anxious for entirely different reasons. Inhaling a deep sniff, Lecter sucked on his teeth and made sure to choose his words carefully.

“As previously stated,” he said, shaking his head as his smile grew teeth, “you’re not my type, little murderer.”

She froze. *More of a sculpture than a human.* Only the blink gave her away, and the rapid beating of her heart he could hear through her ribcage.

“What did you...call me?” she muttered, eyes never leaving his.

“Oh, apologies. Should I have opted for something more inventive?”

“Murderer? Wh-why...why would you *say* that!” springing to life, Abigail pushed up onto all fours, squirming her way to the edge of the bed, eyes wide, “That’s not funny!”

“Should it be?” Hannibal asked, raising a brow as she hurried for the door.

“I don’t know what your deal is, but I don’t want any..!”

“ **Stop** .”

The word reverberated through the room like a physical presence, *like a hundred thousand hands pushing against any surface they could find, exerting his influence, grabbing, pulling, making the*

world in his image. Crossing his ankles, Hannibal looked to his left to observe his handy work. Abigail was stock still, stood in the middle of the floor between the bed and the half open doorway. Her eyes were wide with shock and fear. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly with shallow breathing. If one were to look closer, as Hannibal himself did as he stood and approached until he was standing before her, *she was trembling.*

" **Sit down on the bed** ."

Watching her obey was akin to watching a mechanical doll, an automaton playing at life. She moved as if she were thinking about each movement individually, no flow to her limbs or muscles, jarring and awkward. It was always so when he used his *voice* so harshly, when his power became an order not a suggestion.

He cleared his throat and swallowed, shaking off the feeling of excess. It was always more difficult to exercise his full power when in this form, *this human shell* . Sometimes he could even feel the skin constrain him, like it were nothing but a human suit to be peeled off and discarded. Still, practice had always made perfect, and he'd had a lot of practice.

"Now, where were we, oh yes," he nodded to himself as he once more sat down next to her, "your lurid past. Shall we discuss it? Well, discuss is perhaps a strong word. How about this, I tell you what I know and you do as I say."

She didn't move a muscle. Once more she was the statue, hands folded one over the other on her knees, staring straight ahead at the wall. *Lips closed in a tight line.*

"Wonderful," Hannibal continued, "then where should I start? Ah, yes. The murders. You see, it's tricky to be constrained by the law. The FBI, their investigation is rather one sided. Wholesome, to an extent. I myself find it very important to always have good contacts when trying to piece together a puzzle like this one. In this case," he rubbed his hands against one another before lacing his fingers together, "Your unique power to transform into a harmless animal, it must have drawn them like blood in the water. Did your parents tell you the plan, or was it just a natural evolution of your power? Must be a wonderful lure for the average human. Although, to be fair I think murderer might be a little harsh. You merely ingratiated yourself into their houses and marked them for death, isn't that right?" Hannibal tipped his head and watched as a single tear slid from her eye, across her cheek, and dangled from her chin.

"An angel of death," he proposed, "but not the reaper. Still, it would be interesting to see how the justice system dealt with that woolly distinction. And dear Will, how he would..."

"What do you want?" she interrupted suddenly, voice hard but wavering.

"Very mature of you, Abigail," Hannibal observed, "knowing when you are beaten. It is a strength, not a weakness. I have something I wish you to do for me, and I felt you would not agree without certain impetus."

"Fuck you," she hissed, voice hitching.

"Come now. Let us not be uncivil. This is not personal, you understand. Merely business."

"Christ, are you gonna soliloquise at me or tell me what you *want* ?" she bit out.

Admirably, stupidly brave. Surely another hook that had slid into Will Graham's heart as he'd become awkwardly attached to the runaway. Hannibal sniffed, his lip twitching, as he got his plan in order, "I have a colleague. Her name is Bedelia Du Maurier. I made a promise that I would deliver you to her."

" *Deliver?"* Abigail said, looking to him suddenly, shocked.

"Correct. She helped me with a project, and now I am returning the favour."

"You sick fuck," Abigail said, staring at him with impotent anger, "I should have known it. I should have *known* it. No one's this fucking generous without wanting something in return."

"A life lesson you should hold onto," Hannibal inclined his head, "I want you to meet her at the Farrant Café in town tomorrow at two o'clock in the afternoon. She will take you to a man named Frederick Chilton. You have met him before haven't you? *"*

"Who?" she asked, frowning.

Raising a brow, Hannibal nodded to himself. It seemed the Hobbs parents had kept their daughter as far from Chilton as possible, which was probably wise. Still...

"But you were involved in the murders, the murders that Will is investigating, were you not? With your parents."

"Why are you asking questions you already know the answer to," she said bitterly.

"Excellent. Then you will go with Bedelia to meet Frederick. In return I'll keep your secret from dear Will. You wouldn't want him to..."

"No," she cut in, voice stark.

"I would say that it is odd you care so much about his opinion of you considering how you have been treating him recently," Hannibal mused as he stood, "but then I feel I may understand your plight far more than you will ever truly know. I too am at the mercy of Will Graham's forgiveness."

"What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?" Abigail asked.

"It's not important to you, I suppose. Merely know that I am more sympathetic to your plight than I seem."

"Whoopee-fucking-doo," Abigail said facetiously.

"And I would not put you in harm's way on a whim. Do as I say, and I promise things will work out as intended."

"And if you *intend* to have me fucking sacrificed?" she said tightly.

"Then you will have to take me at my word," Hannibal said with a small smile, "that I do not. When you meet Frederick I want you to pass on a message."

Leaning in close, Hannibal whispered into her ear. It was almost possible to feel the fear emanating from her pores as he spoke, but she did not fight, she did not even try. He continued until he was

done, leaning back and smoothing down his tie.

“Understood?” he asked peremptorily.

After a moment she conceded, “...Yes.”

“Good girl. You may not yet understand it, but I am offering you a rare opportunity for something most people do not see in their lifetime.”

“Oh yeah?” she sounded unconvinced.

“Vengeance.”

“ *What* ?”

“Chilton and his cronies,” Hannibal said bluntly, “had your mother murdered.”

Silence. Not the calm kind. Not the soft, sweet kind. The hard kind, the kind that filled the space where screams should be. He savoured it for what it was, letting it pass.

Turning to leave, Hannibal could feel the moment his influence over Abigail loosened. It was like a rubber band going slack, the atmosphere in the room lost its tension, *as if the walls themselves were able to breathe again* . Just as he was reaching for the door she spoke, surprising him once more with her fearlessness.

“Just what the hell *are* you?” she whispered out, voice shaking.

Looking over his shoulder, he tipped his head slightly and regarded her, swithering over how to reply. Truly, it would have been best not to. No sense in giving the prey any advantage, after all. But then, in the end he felt himself overcome by a moment of utter impetuousness, *perhaps his reverie into the past had affected him more than he’d realised, or perhaps he was simply feeling overconfident.* Whatever the reason, he decided to...

... let the skin drop, just for a moment, peel the human suit back and let...her...see...

She did not scream, but her hand flew to her mouth to cover the one surely bubbling up in her throat, eyes as large as dinner plates, unable to look away even as he reinstated the illusion of his well-dressed self.

“Do not forget our agreement, Abigail. I am a man of my word.”

As he was closing her door upstairs, it echoed the sound of the door front door opening downstairs. Hannibal listened to the sounds of feet moving around, doors opening. For a moment he simply enjoyed the feeling of Graham moving around his house. The energy was ephemeral and diaphanous, like an ember floating above a fire; Graham was clearly aggravated, *upset.* Lecter made his way downstairs as quietly as possible, and rounded the corner at the dining room just as Will was walking out.

“ *Jesus* !” Will jumped as he walked around the corner, hand to his chest, glaring, “You scared the shit out of me!”

“Apologies,” Hannibal said, the picture of restrained surprise, “I was unaware you had returned.”

“Yeah, well,” shaking his head and taking a deep breath, Will composed himself, “sorry, didn’t mean to...wait, that’s not what I wanted to ask, where the fuck is Hannah?” he asked, frowning.

“Your Matron? I thought it prudent to book her a hotel,” Hannibal said, hesitating as he added, “apologies for my bluntness, but you seemed somewhat agitated at the thought of her staying here.”

“Well, y-yeah...” Will cut himself off, lips tight together, eyes closed, *tension building in his joints, movements short and jerky, all readiness with no payoff...*

Breathing deep.

Letting out a long sigh.

Forcing his shoulders to slump.

A mix of annoyance at building himself up for nothing, and relief at no longer having to face up to what was sure to become an argument. *Still*, he thought, hands gripping into fists, *it would only delay the inevitable*. Grinding his teeth, Will scratched at the back of his neck and decided not to think too hard about that right now, *because in truth he felt like he might lose it*, and move on to the next unsavoury thing on his agenda.

“Abigail?” he swallowed, avoiding Lecter’s questioning stare as Will bluntly changed the subject.

“She is asleep,” Lecter said, frowning, “Will, you appear to be distressed...”

“Fuck’s sake, yes *genius* , I’m upset, alright? Can I just ask questions and get answers instead of a goddamned *psych eval* every time we talk?” Will bit out, flexing his fingers.

Tipping his head back and narrowing his eyes, somehow Lecter managed to look concerned and affronted simultaneously. Will, always one to pride himself on not giving a shit, buckled almost immediately.

“Shit. *Shit,* ” he bit out, almost to himself, looking up, “I’m sorry, ok? I'm just stressed, and I...”

“I told you, there is no need to apologise. I am your psychiatrist Will, I assure you I have heard worse.”

“Yeah, well what if right now I’m talking to you as a friend, huh?” Will said quickly, so quickly that he didn’t entirely realise what he’d said until he’d said it; there was a pause, Will fidgeted with the cuff of his jacket, “...look, I...I told myself to stop treating you like crap, it’s just difficult for me to do that with anyone, you get me? It’s been a while since I had anything like...this, whatever this is.”

“As far as I understand it,” Lecter raised a brow, “you just told me. We appear to be friends.”

“Ok, but I was just...” once more Will clamped his mouth shut, and let out a sharp sigh through his nose, “...can we just please forget about that for a minute?”

“Of course,” Lecter said, so accommodating that it made Will feel like screaming at the man.

Will closed his eyes, shook his head and sniffed. *Falling apart, while still held together by a hair’s breadth, string sewn into the skin while the limbs dangled. He felt like a puppet, loosely playing out*

the expected scenarios of his life, dragged wherever other people deemed it necessary. But inside he was screaming, and no one could hear him. No one would hear. No one.

When he felt the arms circle him, hands settling against the small of his back, *pulling him close* , he couldn't find the energy to go rigid, get mad, quip something cutting, *push away like he always did* . Instead, he felt his body soften, his head turn, cheek pressed against a waiting shoulder. His hands reached up, hesitating only once, *fingers twitching in the air,* before they wound around Lecter's broad back.

Silence. Like the dark woods at night.

It was quiet here, as if all other outside influence had fallen short of the bubble. Will let out a soft breath and allowed himself the luxury even as he accepted the utter absurdity of it. *When was the last time you had someone hold you like this?* He asked himself.

Never, if he was to be truthful to himself, *and he wasn't.* No one had ever held him quite like this.

"Don't expect me to spill my guts just because you made me feel better," Will murmured, feeling the fine silk of Lecter's waistcoat beneath his fingers.

"I only ask for what you can reasonably give me," Lecter said evenly.

"Ok," Will found himself saying; he thought he could hear a heartbeat in his left ear, pressed against the fabric, but was unsure whose it was, "I...I just feel a bit like I'm losing my footing. I want to feel stable, like I know where I'm standing. Where I'm going. And I don't. I don't even feel like I know who I...am, anymore," he finished, swallowing.

"Perfectly understandable," Hannibal said with such surety that Will couldn't help but absorb the confidence of it, "considering all that you have been through, I think it fair to say that you are absurdly put together. Lesser men would be in strait jackets."

A small, almost hysterical laugh bubbled up in Will's throat, high pitched and comical. *He'd been the man in the strait jacket, and back then he wasn't sure if that meant he was lesser or not* . Part of him wanted to stand up, push back, *reassert reality,* but mostly he wished he could stay trapped within this insanity for as long as humanly possible. The fear seemed to be draining from his core, the anxiety that was all consuming felt like a distant memory...for a moment, just a moment, Will wouldn't even have cared if this sudden mood change was all at Lecter's bidding. It was goddamn *blissful.*

But everything ended, at some time or another. Pulling back was difficult, like the encounter was sticky against his clothes, trying to keep him close. Hannibal was regarding him with clinical precision, as if looking for any signs of medical problems; Will cleared his throat and sniffed, eyes on the window at the far end of the room.

Frowning, with a wary smile, Will offered, "Thanks?"

"You are welcome," Lecter said easily.

"...You're weird," Will said, drawing out the words slightly, clucking his tongue, "anyone ever tell you that?"

"No one still living," Lecter said enigmatically.

Will stared, and Lecter stared straight back; *eyes into eyes, as if to both evade and detect. A veil and a knife with which to cut through it.* Secrets within secrets, Will thought, and no answers.

“I need to ask another favour,” Will said quickly, before his intuition got the better of him.

“I’m all ears.”

Unable to hide the small smile at Lecter’s unique brand of amenable cynicism, Will carried on, “We just had a meeting, well...not exactly much of one but, Jimmy pointed something out that I missed.”

“Oh?”

“Miriam Lass,” he said, swallowing; *there, in his peripheral, he thought he saw something move,* “I want to visit her apartment.”

“Ah,” Lecter nodded, “I think I follow. I assume this is about the seal that has been popping up in your crime scenes.”

“Yeah,” Will flicked his eyes around the room, finding nothing, before looking back to Lecter, “I need to know if she had one.”

“What will it prove to know?” Lecter asked, almost as if to someone else.

“I don’t...know yet,” Will shrugged, “but it’s important. And Jack is being *Jack* , so...I need your help getting inside.”

“Of course,” Lecter agreed absent-mindedly, still staring off into the middle distance.

“You know, you agree to things I say *a lot* without really thinking about them,” Will said, half teasing-half suspicious.

“I do,” Hannibal smiled, eyes sliding to his without moving his head an inch, *sending a chill down Will’s spine,* “don’t I.”

Will looked away, rubbing at his arms, “Very funny.”

He wished he meant it.

“It is late,” Hannibal stated, seeming to change the mood from soft to fractious and back again with every sentence; Will felt whiplashed by the constant change, “perhaps it would be best to try our luck tomorrow, after you’ve had some rest.”

“No need to sound so fucking patronising,” Will rolled his eyes, even as the stress of the day made itself known as his headache redoubled its efforts, “...but, yeah. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to get some sleep.”

“What do you *mean* you can’t get a hold of her! We had a time set for contact, have you any idea how risky this is? Of course you don’t, you miserable little fucker. What? What does that *mean* ? I swear, if you have to go to the Registry yourself Ingram I want Dr. Unger’s message, understand me? Do you..? Hello? *Hello?!”*

Slamming the phone down would have been an ideal way to vent his frustration, but being on a mobile phone meant that he was denied that pleasure. Frederick Chilton missed the days of rotary phones, the trill of the mechanism as you dialled, the heavy receiver, the fact that it clicked as you replaced it in the cradle. Modern technology, he thought as he gripped the phone tightly before putting it down gently on his desk, was miserably unpunishable.

Leaning back against the wall, he rubbed at his eyes and sighed. Things were getting out of control, slowly but surely the reigns were drifting in different directions, *waiting to roll the carriage at the next bump in the road.* This had all been simple enough for so long, but now they had finally found what they were looking for...now things were getting interesting.

Still, they needed proof. After the disaster that had happened last time with Lass, there was no room for error. Another screw up could cost him more than he was willing to pay. If Graham was the one they needed, they needed to be damn well sure before they made their move.

A tinkling crash . Had that been china hitting the floor? Chilton's head snapped up, body still, listening. *Voices, raised* . He pushed up from the wall and hurried to the door of his study. *The sound of the handle turning just as he reached it.*

The door flew open, hitting him hard on his left side and causing him to stumble backwards, tripping and falling against the rug.

"Wait, Doctor, *please* ," he could hear Tobias saying placatingly, "we were only..."

"Quiet!" a sickeningly familiar voice spat.

Rolling over, Chilton was stopped from standing by a sharp, miserable heel planted squarely in his shoulder. Gritting his teeth he tried for a smile, *mainly because he knew it would irritate her beyond belief.*

"Bedelia, how lovely to see you," Chilton said, motioning for Budge to leave; when the man hesitated Chilton sent him a glare and watched as he slunk from the room, closing the door behind him.

It was bad enough that this was happening, never mind letting his subordinates see him being railroaded.

"So," Du Maurier said with a ruby-red smile as she checked her nails, grinding her heel deep into his shoulder until Chilton let out a sad, muffled cry, "I hear you had a meeting without me."

"I don't know what you're talking *about,* " Chilton tried to deny, but the pain only stabbed deeper causing his pitch to sing; he hissed, licking his lips, "...who was it? Eva? She always was a sycophant..."

"I don't disclose my sources, Chilton," she continued, blasé, "unlike you, I am a professional. And professionals," she stood heavily on him as she walked over his prone form, pulling a guttural sound from him as she passed, before draping herself elegantly over an armchair, "defer to their superiors. Are you a professional, Frederick?"

It took a moment to compose himself enough to stand, *the pain screaming, the nausea tumultuous, but the rage, the sheer rage, was enough to cover all of it like a balm.* He smiled and blinked, feeling a wetness against his shirt, smelling blood.

“Only with other professionals,” he said tightly, “perhaps that is out problem, Bedelia.”

“You miserable little leech,” Bedelia smiled like a shark as she spoke, acid eyes cutting at his resolve, “you never did have a clue. At least the Vergers had class.”

“The Vergers are dead. You should know all about that, after all.”

“No need to bring up the past,” she said airily, reaching out with fingers aptly decked in red nails, to pick up the one thing in the room Chilton wished she hadn’t; that he fidgeted when she lifted the mug gave her pause, then as she watched him she smiled slyly she began flipping the mug up into the air and catching it, over and over, “what’s the matter Fred? Something precious?”

Little hands, handing over the mug eagerly into his own, smiling face laughing as he exclaimed, ‘My goodness, darling, look at this, it’s wonderful!’. His son had clapped as his father had given it pride of place on the mug-tree, saying he’d take it to work to drink his coffee every day.

“You know,” Chilton said as he leaned against his desk and watched her, “for someone so vindictive you take it out on the oddest people. While you’re here getting in a tizzy because I went behind your back, he’s still out there in the lap of luxury, with you as his fucking pet...”

He knew it was a stupid thing to say. He knew it, but no longer felt as if he could care. Reminiscing about the past always made him apathetic to the present. Bedelia was across the room in two strides, a hand around his throat. Chilton could feel the claws had come out, sharp against his skin, and just out of the corner of his eye he could see her skin turning black as ebony.

“He ruined *my life,* " Bedelia spat, teeth bared, “just as much as he did yours! Understand me when I say I am not his *pet* . Hannibal Lecter is a demon, a true monster, but he is not stupid. Far fucking from it! Do you want this to work or do you want *to die* ?”

Behind her, on the rug, Chilton could see the mug on the ground, the handle broken and lying in pieces.

“I...want this to work,” he ground out, gasping as she let him go, hand retracting into its glamour, *back to being slim, beautifully manicured, nails painted red* , "but we have to be sure he's the one."

“Good answer,” she said, smoothing down her hair and smiling, “I am not solely a harbinger, you know. I am capable of being nice, even to those that screw me over. I have some information about your errant stray, she might be able to help us with our indentification problem.”

That got his attention.

“The Hobbs girl?” he asked a little too eagerly.

“On a platter,” Bedelia smiled.

The phone in his hand was held tightly, ringing in his ear, *in a way that he wished might end in a voicemail so he could leave a message* . Before long he found himself chewing on his thumbnail, eyes unfocused.

“Hello, Will,” the tired voice of Hannah appeared eventually, just as he’d been tempted to hang up and try again tomorrow, “you better have a dang good reason for ruining my beauty sleep.”

“Why are you here?” he asked without compunction.

Silence. Then a sigh. Will waited, knees up to his chest as he sat on the guest room bed, feeling awkward and uncomfortable. Always been something he was good at, *waiting* . He and Hannah had spent a lifetime butting heads, but this...this was something else. Something different. Something dangerous. He didn’t want to touch it, but it called to him, like a siren on the rocks.

“Honestly?” she said after a minute of nothing but dead air, “I felt something was wrong with you last time we spoke. So the girls and I did a ritual and we’ve been...”

“Spying on me.”

“Don’t be such a wilting flower, baby child,” Hannah said, brassy as ever, “I don’t need your permission slip. I know something is wrong here, and I’m going to make sure you do too.”

“Yeah,” Will took a deep, quick breath through his nose before letting it out, *steeling himself,* “something’s wrong alright.”

“Well, I’m glad you noticed.”

“You’ve been lying to me.”

The break in conversation was palpable, *as if he could feel her watching him,* “What did you just say to me?”

“You fucking heard me,” Will said, voice tight but unsure.

“Well, that’s interesting,” Hannah’s voice was like razor wire, “because I feel I could say the same to you!”

“Is that fucking right?”

“You’re damn well it is!”

“Shit,” Will muttered, curling in on himself further until he felt he could barely breathe, “this is bullshit. This is *bullshit* . Why can’t you just...míle rópaí timpeall do mhuineál, Hannah if it’s true, if you’re lying to me...”

“You’ve convinced yourself, haven’t you, that I’m the bad guy here. All by yourself, that right?”

“I’ve got my reasons.”

“Is that so? Then let’s hear it!”

No avoiding the issue now, is there? Will thought, stomach dropping out. It was one thing calling her out, like he had done when he was a bratty teenager and she wouldn’t take his shit, but this ate at him. There was a terrible finality to it, so much so that the words stuck in his throat.

There’s a photograph , he wanted to say. *There’s a photograph in my bag that broke my world open and I’m scared of what’s going to fall out.* But the words wouldn’t come.

“Alright. If that’s how it is,” Hannah said, sounding stalwart but hurt. *He could hear it in her voice* , “maybe we should just leave it for now.”

"...Yeah. I guess we should," Will said, but he could hear the resistance in his voice; there was a telling break in the conversation, until Will couldn't stand it, sighing, "Your hotel ok?"

"It's very...extravagant," she said, trying to sound flippant but not pulling it off.

"Yeah," Will managed to chuff out a half-hearted laugh, even as he rubbed at his chest and hated the tight feeling there, "that sounds like something Lecter would do."

"You like him, don't you."

"I...yeah, I guess," Will said, feeling a little exposed.

"Are you sleeping with him?" she asked bluntly.

"Jesus Hannah, for fuck's *sake* !" Will said, unable to hide his embarrassment, "Mind your own goddamn business!"

"I'll take that as a yes, then."

"I hate to tell you this but it's a little late for a talk about the birds and the bees, if that's where this is going. Fuck, what am I even talking about, we're not *sleeping together,* ok? Not like that, anyway, just sleeping and I mean it was just the once and it wasn't *sex* so...what the fuck am I even *saying* ? I really can't do this right now, not right now. I have a headache and this conversation is creeping me the fuck out. It isn't exactly a good time to talk."

"Then why'd you call me?"

The rise and fall of his chest became a clock to tick out time, seconds and seconds and minutes and minutes. Life as it was right now, in this moment, but any second now it could change. It could become something new, irreparably so. Once the words left him, they couldn't be retracted. They would sculpt the landscape of his life, blindly turning it on its head. *Is this what you want?* He asked himself. It was difficult to know that the answer was...

No. It wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to hang up the phone and never speak of it again. He wanted to burn the photographs and the police reports and the whole dirty package of doubt that had been sown into his already complicated life. Pretend it had never happened.

"...Uh, I...needed to ask a favour," he lied smoothly.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. I have to go to Miriam's apartment tomorrow."

"Will..."

"It's important," he pressed, "really important. But not exactly...sanctioned. Lecter said he'd help me get inside, no problem, but I don't exactly know what I'm going to find. Would you come? Two witches are always better than one, after all."

A telling pause, *because he knew that she knew he was being flippant and facetious in order to hand wave away the real problems.* Still, she was also wise enough to know when to pick her battles.

“Mmhmm,” she said lightly, “Well, I suppose I’m not doing anything tomorrow.”

“Can we do morning? I really don’t want it to wait too long.”

“So you keep me up late, and then want an early morning too? Kids these days.”

“Spare me the speech,” Will rolled his eyes, hesitating before, “...I gotta go.”

“Will...just promise me you’re being careful.”

“Christ, this better not be a PSA about using protection,” Will muttered, shaking his head.

“I meant keeping your guard up, and your senses keen. It’s bad enough this is just like last time.”

“Tell me about it,” Will sighed heavily.

“And I don’t...I don’t like you being anywhere near the Registry.”

“Then that makes two of us.”

“Boy, don’t be so flippant. Not now. There’s something bad happening here. I know it, and you know it. Something bad happening.”

“I know. I know it. I will be, careful I mean. You know me. Ok...I have to go.”

“Go dtiocfaidh an breacadh an lae,” Hannah said seriously.

“...Go dtiocfaidh an breacadh an lae,” Will repeated, sniffing, before hanging up, dumping the phone onto the duvet.

It took all of three minutes deliberation before he was up, padding barefoot across the rug and opening the door. The landing was dark and quiet, floorboards creaking once as he picked his way to the door by muscle memory. It opened quietly, displacing air in the way only heavy wood could. Will clicked the latch gently as he shut it, before making his way towards the vague outline of the bed as seen in the moonlight seeping through the gap in the curtains.

The moon, serving only as a dour reminder of the hourglass of time trickling away, the looming reaper waiting to take another life, the longer they stumbled around in the dark unable to piece together this puzzle.

Just as his legs bumped into the bed and he leaned down to slip inside, he found a hand lifting the covers. Will hesitated, *only a second or so*, before climbing in and allowing Lecter to wrap him in a warm, comforting embrace. The man’s skin was hot, like he’d been sitting in the sunshine all day long, *glowing*. Will pressed his face against the man’s neck and revelled in the almost instantaneous contentment that satiated *his fear his anxiety his anger his frustration...*

“You’re cold,” he heard Lecter mutter sleepily by his ear.

“You’re not,” Will replied softly; shifting around to get comfortable, Will added, “...I don’t mean to make a habit of this.”

“There’s a lot of stigma in a label. Perhaps don’t call it a habit. How about a nightly ritual?”

Will let out a soft chuckle, shivering involuntarily as Lecter's hand grazed his side beneath his nightshirt, "I don't know. In my line of work ritual might be worse than habit."

"Hmm, true," Lecter said, fingers seeming to be rubbing absent circles against his pelvic bone; Will closed his eyes, "design then. Your design."

"Design," Will swallowed, knowing the significance of the word; *my design* , "I think I could live with that."

"Wonderful," Lecter's voice was already drifting off towards sleep once more.

"Yeah," Will tried to heed Hannah's warning, *keep his guard up* , but it was difficult when every fibre of his being felt content, felt *happy* , "wonderful."

It was the early hours, but in the strip-lit halls of the Registry it was difficult to know the difference between morning and night without a watch. Within the bowels of the facility, seven stories below ground in the maze-like tunnels of Research and Development, CEO Markus Hopkins walked alongside Ekon Adebayo, head of Genetic Research, and tried to remain optimistic.

He hated coming down here. It stank of desperation, ozone and the faint hint of rancid meat. Not a good cocktail on an empty stomach.

"I saw the press release about the sighting," Adebayo said casually while Hopkins thought about dinner; he could hear the smugness in the man's tone but chose to ignore it, "it was good. Calm. That always helps when people get hysterical."

"The public likes to have the Registry on their side. Even as they say we're barbaric, they'd rather watch the Unnaturals burn and blame us for the slaughter than fight the good fight on their own terms."

"Ironic, really," Adebayo grinned, "if you think about it."

"I try not to," Hopkins sighed, "waste of time. Speaking of," he changed tack, "how has the research into the ritual been coming along?"

"Not well. It seems there's something we are doing wrong, even though we have followed the steps to the letter," Adebayo said, shrugging; his face was sweaty as he pushed the heavy trolley in front of him, wheels rolling smoothly, "I think there must be something else that only Lecter knows about."

"Don't mention that fucking monster to me."

"He's really gotten under your skin, hasn't he," Adebayo said wryly, giving him the snide side-eye, "it's a shame we can't have him down here with us. I can only imagine the secrets that body holds, that *brain* holds."

"We both know it'll never happen," Hopkins said tersely, running a hand through his hair and grimacing at the sweat against his scalp, "Lecter would never put himself in a position where he could be caught. He's always one step ahead of the snare. *Shit,* " taking a deep breath, Hopkins centred himself, *focusing on the regular sound of their footsteps tapping in tandem, the rolling of*

the wheels, "...he's the last thing on this earth I want to have power over us right now. Especially at this critical time. Isn't there any other way to find out what we need?"

"Not unless the research library has texts missing that you haven't told me about, because I've been through everything. I have my teams liaising with our contacts throughout the Steppes, seven bases with access to the area. Nothing new yet."

"Fantastic."

Turning right at a large intersection, they began the final approach. It was getting warmer with every step, the atmosphere oppressive and thick with humidity. He could sense the lack of oxygen in the air making his head light and his breathing heavy. Loosening his tie, Hopkins undid the top button on his shirt and puffed out a long sigh. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Ekon set his mouth, brow beading with sweat, hands gripping the trolley tighter. The man was brilliant, *he'd known that from the moment he hired him* , and ruthless, *he knew that from the things he'd done for the Registry* , but if there was one thing he couldn't stand about Adebayo it was his passive aggressiveness.

"Whatever's on your mind, spit it out," Hopkins said eventually.

"You should let us bring him in."

"Who's that?" Hopkins tried to play dumb.

"You know who I mean. The host. We have the authority..." Adebayo said, irritated.

"And then what?" Hopkins interrupted sourly, "Bring him in so you can tell me you still don't know how to complete the ritual? Fat lot of good that would do us."

"I've seen the roster of idiots they have on that taskforce. Fucking Jimmy Price, that hack, putting his grubby hands all over something *I* have worked my whole life to understand."

"Frankly, I don't give a shit about your hang ups, Ekon," Hopkins said lazily, "and certainly not your intellectual rivalries. We stick to the plan and we'll end up flush, mark my words."

Next to him, he could tell Ekon was furious. If there was one thing the man disliked above all else, it was having his academic ability questioned.

"You really think this is all just going to work out in the end?" Adebayo asked sarcastically.

"I never assume anything," Hopkins shrugged, "but so far things are falling within acceptable parameters. If we let this group do the work for us, there will always be losers, but we will get a better result. When we ran the numbers, we're hoping as little as twenty-five to thirty percent losses. Any more than that will be a failure."

"That'll hardly even cover the new proposal," Adebayo frowned, "the extension Homeland Security were asking for warrants at least ten new Amanuensis to run. We've already lost Unger, and now if we lose as many as you say..."

"It won't matter," Hopkins dismissed him with a strict hand, both men slowing as they came to a large door; strutted in silver and gold the lines of precious metals marked out large, concentric overlapping circles, inlaid in each quadrant with deep runes and composed of the finest granite; it

was a magnificent specimen. The pride of his collection, found three hundred years ago by his ancestors while hunting werewolves in the Balkans. Since then it had served as a perfect Seal, a barrier between the normal world they kept safe for the clueless civilians far above on the level ground...and the truth, “once we get our hands on the source, we’ll be able to create as many as we need.”

As the door recognised him, runes glowing with a faint ethereal light, it rolled open noiselessly. *Always disconcerting, for something so large to make no noise* . Then, once it was done, Hopkins took a moment to stare through. *Necessary,* he told himself as he looked at the room revealed, noise unable to escape through the thin veil the seal left in its wake, *it was all necessary.* Beside him, a faint humming groan caught his ear. He sighed, looking down at the trolley Adebayo had been pushing. The man strapped to it had finally awoken, and was now furiously testing the bonds, eyes glassy but terrified.

Necessary , Hopkins repeated to himself as he stared at the sacrifice. As they stepped beyond the barrier, their feet leaving the mortal plain, the wailing began.

Chapter End Notes

“míle rópaí timpeall do mhuineál”
a thousand ropes around your neck

“Go dtiocfaidh an breacadh an lae”
Until the dawn

Resin (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

Translations are at the bottom of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lush. Verdant. Dark. *Primeval* .

In the low light, everything appeared to move, *shudder.* The kinetic state of living organisms, atoms juddering, jostling.

Wind moving leaves, animals pawing dirt, frogs leaping into water, insects floating on rising banks of hot air.

The forest at twilight.

It took him back, *remembering those days of cursed existence, wandering the ground barefoot and bleeding, shivering, trembling to his very core, feeling the weight of her in his arms as he carried them forwards, always forwards, always away from the vile hatred that had chased them into the forest.*

So long ago now. It almost seemed like a fairy tale.

It had been simpler, this time, to find his way back to the trail. *Little leaves in the dark, springing up into ferns and rope-like vines of ivy, trees with rich canopies.* The sound of the wind in the leaves and unseen water trickling nearby. This time he was not cautiously treading new ground, or clumsily invading and tripping over traps like a rube. *Now, he felt as if he had earned this.*

Hannibal Lecter stopped with purpose and breathed in deeply. Here, as he stood in the grandeur of their shared mindscape, it was enjoyable to *smell* and *see* and *feel* . Before, when he had accessed Graham's sleeping mind it had been difficult, *damaging*. Then when he had accessed his awakened mind, it had been devastating. Remembering the stress of searching though the man's psyche as if on an endless treasure hunt, *the man's multiple personalities in the void* , and of course the antlers piercing his flesh, *a trauma fiercely guarded* .

Still. If this level of symbiosis was anything to go by, *he felt like he was truly here* , then things were most certainly going to plan. Even in the dark the leaves seemed to glow with inner light, fireflies dancing in the air. The vegetation crunched beneath his well-shined shoes as he trekked through, pushing boughs aside as he searched.

It did not take long.

The next step brought him into a clearing, very similar to the first he had encountered. It was well lit, though this time by moonlight instead of sunlight, and profuse with the scent of wet fur and feathers. There, in the centre, the stag was watching him, *large dark eye seeming wary but*

somewhat blinded by familiarity. It lay as if resting, and yet once again the smell of blood was heavy, *almost rich* , on the air.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Lecter smiled slowly.

The stag merely snorted through its large nostrils, sending a coil of milky breath into the chill air. His approach was cautious, but without fear. This time it was different, he saw. Not a crude beartrap, but a series of thin, almost invisible wires wrapped around different parts of the proud animal; *blood leaking from neck, from haunch, from tail.* The wires were golden, on closer inspection, almost gossamer-like but tough and cutting to the touch. A spider web spun of wire and pain, *designed to keep the furred and feathered thing from moving an inch.*

“It seems the witches have done their work well,” he muttered as he plucked one of the fine strands, watching it vibrate, singing like a fine violin, “trapping you here. How many more of these has she fashioned?”

With a low rumble in its throat the stag lifted its head to bray a long, low note at the moon above. As the sound continued it pitched higher, almost squealing. *The feel of it was intrinsic to his existing here at all, like it resonated with the core of his being, a siren’s song.*

Trapped. Trapped. TRAPPED.

Lecter waited until the sound dissipated before sniffing, shaking his head.

It was so close now. So close he thought maybe he could touch it, *taste it* . The ability to shape his future into one where he could see her again. Bring the teacup back together again without a crack. So much time had passed, and yet sometimes he thought he could look over his shoulder and see her there, smiling at him.

Mischa.

“I won’t take any convincing,” he said, waving his hand, eyes serious as he watched the sad creature before him, *feathers ruffling in the dark* , “it was always my intention,” he said sombrely, “to free you.”

Waking up, blinking at the first rays of sunlight glancing over the rooftops and into his eyes, Will Graham blanched at the pain in his skull and groaned softly. It was early, he knew from the clock on the bedside table, too early. *5am* . Slowly and clumsily he dragged his hand up across the bedsheets and managed to sort-of-shield his eyes from the offending glare.

God my fucking head feels like shit, he thought miserably. A pain was throbbing, deep in his temples, radiating down to the top of his spine. Somewhere in his foggy brain he wondered if maybe he was coming down with something; *the headaches were getting worse.* Behind him he could feel the pressure of a body against the sensitive skin of his back and, for a quick moment, he panicked. Craning his head around Will hissed in pain at the action, before blinking at the familiar sight.

“Oh yeah,” he murmured to himself, blinking, “I did that, didn’t I.”

Lecter was still fast asleep on his side. His eyes were closed, long lashes brushing his high cheeks, lips slightly parted as he breathed softly. His naked skin, taught across his muscles, was peppered

with curling hair shot through with grey. It was difficult to resist, even if Will felt a stab of guilt as his eyes blinked lower, across the man's chest, following the tantalising trail of hair as it disappeared down beneath the covers.

A soft, sleepy noise had Will starting badly, swallowing to himself as he pulled back quickly, *having realised that he'd been tipping his head for a better view* . Looking up he found Lecter still asleep, and Will let out a breath of relief at not being caught.

"Fucking shitty thing to do anyway," Will chastised himself, swallowing, "pervert."

Slipping out of bed was easy. It seemed Lecter was a deep sleeper, and even though Will had needed to move the man's arm, *curled as it was around Will's waist* , he didn't wake. Will took the advantage and sneaked from the room and down the stairs in search of the stash of painkillers he knew were in the kitchen. The early morning air was chill against his legs, long sleeved nightshirt keeping his arms from goosebumps. Eyes squinting as he turned on the light in the dark, fingers fumbling against the wall to find the switch. It didn't take long to find the strips of ibuprofen and rummage for a clean glass. Jamming the water on, Will ground his teeth and popped two pills from their blister pack.

"When's the last time you got ill? Can't really remember," he muttered, taking the pills in behind his front teeth, manoeuvring them with his tongue before taking a swallow of icy water; he squinted in pain at the chill against his teeth, swallowing harshly, choking a little as they went down awkwardly, "Fuck."

Rubbing at his throat Will continued to swear under his breath, walking across the cold floor tiles to grab a tea towel and mop at his mouth and chin. Rubbing at his face he calmed his breathing and sighed, coughing softly, eyes closed.

"Ahh this morning can go fuck itself," he said in a rush, savouring the darkness behind his closed eyelids, opening his eyes slowly, sniffing as he looked outside into the dark garden lit only by the waning light of dawn, before he froze, "what the *christ* ..?"

Hannibal Lecter's pristine urban back garden was neat and controlled, like a display desperate to win first place. Since he'd laid eyes on it, Will had resented it. Wanted weeds to pop up in the lawn, wanted to plant herbs in the border, wanted the trees to grow wild instead of being pruned to perfection. And now...

...*A faun* . Bright eyed and nibbling at the lush ferns planted calculatedly beneath the cluster of fruit trees by the fence. A little nugget of unexplainable chaos with its hooves in the grass. And further back...a fox, sleeping, curled up on the lawn chair with its impressive tail dangling from the cushions. And in the tall oak in the far corner a flock of ravens were perched like a council in session, preening and cawing; a bustle of rabbits nibbling grass near the koi pond. As Will stared, blinking, and tried to make sense of what he was seeing a rack of fine antlers was raised in the back by the fence as a stag lifted its head, ears flicking, to regard him.

Hello , it all seemed to say. His skin shivered in response.

Rubbing at his temples, Will blinked before stepping away, feet carrying him from the menagerie. *Mind trying to convince him he was perhaps asleep, yes still asleep, maybe a dream, maybe nothing more than a thought escaping his brain to stick itself over his reality like a plaster.* Maybe he hadn't even seen it at all, he thought to himself as he hurried back up the stairs blearily.

You aren't even awake , he tried to convince himself though he felt the cold floor beneath his feet and the slight nausea of the water sloshing in his stomach; he padded as quietly as he could back towards Lecter's room, unable to stop his scared hands from yanking open the door and...

A burst of fluttering black wings, deep and velveteen, swarmed out against his face like a net. Will opened his mouth to scream but the mass of wings stifled all sound. Falling back from the phantom of black he panicked, every brush of wing, every cling of insect feet against his skin, every moment of the suffocating thing trying its best to overwhelm him. His feet gave out as he tried desperately to move backwards, tripping, falling...

And there, through the throng of fluttering wings, through the barrier they seemed to create, rushed a screaming cry...

...a baby, it was a baby crying, screaming, *screaming...!*

He felt as if he were falling in slow motion, and he couldn't escape, and then as he felt the floor hit his back the black wings surged and undulated and there, at the nadir a pair of pearl white hands descended from above, fingers curled into claws, rushing forth to grab him by the neck and **push.**

His back was no longer against the floor but descending below it, as if shoved into deep, deep water. Will screamed and his mouth filled with the wings, with the fluttering, moving moths, choking and choking until he tried his best to breathe and...

He was underwater, and every breath he took was agony, sucking down into his lungs as the hands held tight around his throat, holding him below even as he struggled to escape, someone please, someone help, someone save me..!

"Will? Will!"

Eyes snapping open like cut elastic bands stretched too far, hands jerking against an unseen foe, *grabbing against skin* , trying to scream but the fluid in his mouth wouldn't let him. Turning desperately onto his side, Will Graham vomited out the water and choked unpleasantly again and again. His eyes were stinging and his chest convulsed as a hand, *an unknown hand* , drew comforting circles against his back. Despite his distress, he hurried to turn around, hands slipping against the wet wood, his eyes streaming tears, vision blurred.

He thought he saw her there, a face he'd never known, staring at him...

Mama?

"Will, be calm, you were having a nightmare."

Blinking dispelled the bizarre vision he thought, for nothing more than a second, he had seen there in the gloom. Instead, Hannibal Lecter stared down at him with concern. Will blinked again, looking at the shimmering pool of water on the floorboards by his head, trying his best to push up on shaking hands. When Lecter helped him up, strong arms pulling him into a sitting position with ease, *Will couldn't help but fall into the embrace.*

It felt real. It felt grounding. *It felt like the beauty of a memory lost.*

Shaking. He was shaking.

“You’re alright. You’re awake now.”

“I don’t...” Will choked, coughing roughly, “know.”

“Believe me when I tell you, I am no dream.”

Eyes tight shut, squeezed so hard he saw stars, Will clung to the man crouched on the floor beside the evidence of his madness as if he were a buoy on a dark night at sea.

“I had...had a dream,” Will was whispering, “I was dr-drowning. I don’t...know...”

“There’s no need to understand,” Lecter’s hand was soothing a rhythm at the back of his neck, over and over, “you are awake now.”

“But,” Will turned his head to look down, *seeing it there, the water, the truth, against the floorboards, shimmering in a crescent shape like a Cheshire grin* , “it’s...it’s *real* ...”

He could do nothing but watch as Hannibal reached down with his free hand, fingers splayed to push into the water, *and he wanted to tell him to stop, don’t touch it, don’t!* But his mouth stayed sown shut as he watched the man move the water around, pulling two small disintegrating white circles out onto the dry wood. Will coughed softly and stared, unsure what to say.

“Did you go downstairs and take some painkillers?” Lecter asked clinically.

“...Y-yes,” Will said, nodding a little.

“I see. Perhaps too much for your stomach this early in the morning when taken without food for them to settle upon. It seems your body thought it best to eject them.”

Will stared at the pills as if they were a mockery. *Was that the truth?* He thought. *Nothing more than a physical reaction with a rational explanation?*

“I saw...” he stopped suddenly, *as if he’d brought both hands rushing up to his mouth to stop himself.*

There was a silence, a torturous silence, and he thought he could feel the water still moving inside of him, still there, *still choking.* Eventually, Lecter spoke softly, “Will?”

“I’m alright,” he lied, “I am.”

Strong hands helped him to stand on shaky legs. When Hannibal turned to walk back into the bedroom Will kept a hold of his hand for balance. When the door closed behind him, he felt as if it were a high wall to keep the rising waters on the other side at bay.

Jack Crawford hated this kind of bullshit. As he sat in his car at the corner of the park, darkness just lifting, he turned on the heater for warmth and waited.

This was not why he became an FBI agent. Not why he fought his way to the top of his department. Not why he sacrificed what most would call a normal life in order to make sure people were kept safe from the worst this world had to offer. *Reduced to nothing but skulking on street corners to meet with people who peddled information for a price.*

It took about twenty minutes for her to show. Her headlights lit up the wet ground, parking a few cars away before the lights winked out. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that this was for the best. Once day, maybe even Will would thank him for what he'd done.

Yeah , he thought, *and pigs might fly.*

Even in the low streetlights he saw her hair before anything else. Winding down the window Crawford blanched as the chill air flooded in from outside, along with a black gloved hand bearing a manila envelope. He took it, hating the icy paper against his skin. Looking up, he found Freddie Lounds staring at him intently, hands wrapped up under her armpits to keep them warm.

"You got something for me?" she said baldly.

"Would you be doing this for anything less?" Crawford needled as he grabbed a thick envelope wrapped in brown paper from the empty passenger seat, holding it as if he were handling sewage.

"Pot kettle black," she said with a raised brow as she took the package, weighing it in her hands and seeming satisfied, "enjoy your packet of sins, agent Crawford."

He closed his window to block out her, the cold, the dark, *everything* . Watching her walk away, Crawford took a deep breath and started the car, leaving without a second thought. Driving to work seemed anathema after what he had done. Walking into a building constructed to house those who honoured truth and justice above all else, it made him feel like a fraud as colleagues in early or leaving late nodded to him on the way past.

Sitting at his desk, Jack Crawford opened the envelope marked ***Graham, W.*** and spilled out its contents on the desk.

Surprisingly, he had expected more problems, and yet since picking up Hannah from her pleasant accommodation at the Ivy Hotel, there had been nothing but *quiet* . Lecter's Bentley almost seemed deadened, sound proofed, as if nothing coming in or going out. Hannah, sat in the back seat, had given Lecter a polite 'good morning' and Will a 'beannacht breacadh an lae' before settling into silence. Will, still shaken from his rough morning, and Lecter seeming unwilling to pester him further about it, were also stoutly uncommunicative.

By the time they arrived at the apartment building which had once housed Miriam Lass, Will felt like he'd turned the sound on as he exited the car, assaulted by honking horns and driving cars and people's shoes clacking on the sidewalk. Rubbing at his forehead, he regretted not taking more ibuprofen after spewing up the last one's.

"Elevator, please," Will said, pointing to the silver doors as he saw Lecter heading for the stairs, "she lives...lived on the eighteenth. Don't make me walk it, I don't have the energy."

"Of course," Hannibal let go of the door he had half pushed open, looking to Hannah with a closed-eye-smile, "apologies, I am being most selfish."

"Not at all," Hannah said, smile surprisingly sharp; Will frowned at the strange edge to their interaction that he hadn't noticed the day before, "I'm fitter than my age demands."

"I would believe it," Lecter said.

Will called the elevator and tried his best to ignore them. As he watched the numbers descend, he realised he was holding his shoulders tight, forcing them to relax down. It was...

...it was odd. Being here. He felt as if, maybe, he was walking beside all of the other Will Graham's who had ever visited here. *Himself carrying pizza, himself wet from the rain and pissed about it, himself the first time she had made him come and pick her up to go to work because her car was in the shop.*

Himself the last time he had been here, eyes haunted, limbs humming with terrified energy, desperate for her not to be gone, not to be missing, not to be...

When he found himself standing in front of her door, *number seventy-one* , he honestly couldn't remember how he got there. Blinking, he rubbed at the knot of pain between his eyebrows and stepped back, looking to Lecter as he gestured towards the door.

"If you could," he muttered.

"Naturally," Lecter smiled, offering a comforting hand upon his shoulder as he guided him from the door; *Hannah appeared to be purposefully ignoring Lecter's efforts, looking around the hallway with keen eyes as if searching for something.*

Will walked back a few steps and leaned against the wall, eyes down at the carpet beneath his shoes. Truthfully, he was always fascinated to see Lecter work. A morbid fascination, but fascination nonetheless. Yet today he couldn't muster the energy. *Too much* , he thought as he stared at the carpet, that exact hue of dark, navy blue that he associated with here and nowhere else, *maybe it was all too much, too close, too heavy.* He felt like he might be at an intersection, where all the points of his life were meeting, *Hannah, Lecter, Miriam, Abigail, the Chesapeake Ripper, his dreams, his reality.* Somehow, instead of sharpening it seemed to dull his senses.

A protection mechanism, maybe, he thought as he looked up to see Lecter gesturing for him to enter; in the doorway stood a young man in his late twenties, looking pensive but oddly happy to see him. Realising that he hadn't paid attention to the story Lecter had spun, he decided to stay quiet in case he broke their cover by contradicting something. Instead, he looked to Hannah and waited for her nod before entering through the door, *like walking into the past.*

The same, yet different. The same walls, the same rooms, but different furniture and colour schemes and curios; *like a familiar person wearing different clothes* . He walked step by step, listening closely even as he shut out the benign conversation Lecter was holding with the occupants. *Listening closely for the tug, the pull* . He walked into the living room and, for a bizarre moment, thought he heard...

"Hey, you want another?"

Turning his head sharply to the doorway leading to the kitchen, Will blanched on finding Hannah standing there. Blinking, he looked away from her knowing eyes and rubbed at his face self-consciously.

"You feel it?" he asked her.

"I feel lots of things. This place is soaked in memories, running across every surface."

“Beneath that,” Will said, a little irritated at her whimsical assessment, “beneath the surface. Something else. Something out of place, like a cuckoo in the nest ...*there.”*

A tug. He felt his eye twitch, pulling him back out into the hallway and towards the bedroom. *No longer the turquoise bedsheets atop the pine bedstead, no longer the floor length mirror propped against the wall, no longer the little cat bed next to her second-hand nightstand.* Now, the sheets were cream, and the furniture modern and stylish. Will blinked and then scratched at his right eyelid as it twitched.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing...

Tug.

There. His feet walked across the floorboards, leading him as he followed the feeling, the draw, the *oddness in the room that shouldn’t have been there* . Beneath the wide window that faced the next apartment block on the street, Will stared at the radiator attached to the wall. Painted a sickly cream, it stood like a child trying to hide something behind its back.

“It’s here. I know it is,” he said with surety, hands working their way around the metal as if feeling for a way in.

“You sound pretty certain there,” Hannah said from behind him.

“Not my first rodeo,” he shrugged as he leaned over the radiator, trying to peer down behind it.

“And what was your first?” she asked carefully.

Faltering, Will hid his surprise by continuing his search of the wall. Pulling out his phone he turned on the flashlight app and sniffed, using it to illuminate the space behind the radiator. His first Seal...he supposed he hadn't really dwelled on it. *Remembering the **thing** he had seen at Jessica Salome’s house, long fingers pointing to the wall, showing him where to look.*

Illuminating the path.

“One of the other victims,” Will said, letting out a sound of impatience when he couldn’t find what he was looking for, getting to his hands and knees before laying down prone on the floor to peer up underneath it, “it was on her wall. I found it...by accident.”

“Uh huh. How come you didn’t ever find any of these before, years ago? You know, when you did the first investigation?”

Chewing at his bottom lip, Will glanced over to see Hannah peering at a set of photographs on top of a chest of drawers. Part of him wanted to tell her, but the other part was stronger. More distrustful. Sometimes it was difficult to claw back faith once it was lost. *The photograph in his pocket kept him wary, even as the little boy in him was desperate to tell her the truth.* He looked away, back to his work, shimmying a little closer to the wall until his cheek was pressed to the skirting board.

“Couldn’t tell you,” he said casually, “all that matters is that now...” his words slowed as he caught the edge of a line, *something* , behind the main panel where it attached to the wall, “...I can. Dammit, it’s right up in there.”

“I doubt even your buddy Lecter will be able to convince this nice young couple that dismantling their plumbing is necessary,” Hannah said dryly.

“Actually, you’d be surprised, he can be pretty persuasive,” Will said as he got to his knees and wiped the dust from his face, hand on his thigh while he thought about what to do next; feeling eyes on him he looked up at Hannah, finding her stare unabashedly direct, “what?”

“Has he ever tried to..?” she started.

“Yeah,” Will cut her off, shrugging uncomfortably, “didn't work.”

“I see.”

“Oh you do, do you?” Will said acerbically, looking away suddenly as a light went on somewhere in his brain, “Wait, of *course* ,” opening his camera app and setting the flash to *‘on’* , Will stuck his hand up the wall, using his fingers to shimmy the phone up inside the panel, flopping it back from the wall. It was difficult, but he managed to click the button on the side, a bright flash radiating out across the paint and metal, “hope it can focus in there,” he muttered as he brought out the phone and opened the gallery.

And it was instantaneous. He found it difficult for words to form. All he could see was the photograph, slightly blurry and at an off angle, but unmistakable nonetheless. His mind raced, shocked.

“What the fuck?” Will whispered to himself, cradling the phone close.

“Will, what’s wrong?” Lecter had appeared at the doorway to the bedroom, pulling Will’s gaze.

“I...this can’t be right. Can’t be...” he ground his teeth together and struggled to his feet; thrusting the phone at Hannah, she took it gingerly. He watched her as she observed the out of focus Seal, no long a complex series of symbols and circles, no longer a confusing mess of ideologies, religions, alchemical and scientific and languages from across the globe. The original Seal could be seen faintly behind it, burnt out in place of the new Seal it had birthed when triggered.

Not at all what Price had posited would occur. Now, all that was left was a set of three concentric circles and there, at their centre, a single rune.

A circle, overlapped by a large X drawn through its centre, and at the end of each line an intersecting bar that turned the ends into crosses. A symbol rarely seen on its own, for its very nature was that of undoing and redoing, *pulling apart and* remaking. In an alchemical sense it dealt with elements changing from one to another. But here, divorced from that, it became sinister; a symbol associated with those willing to tear open a person and remake them as they saw fit.

Anneal

“What does this mean?” he found himself asking Hannah as she stayed quiet, “How is that...how is that *possible* ? It was a complex Seal, utilising at least thirty different symbols,” he could hear the

hysteria in his voice, “and now its coalesced into just *one?* And that one, why...why *that* one? Does that *mean* ...?”

Stopping short he swallowed, suddenly realising a bigger issue; *oh god, Miriam. That means it was her, she triggered it. They wanted her, all this time it really was her that they wanted*. He stared at his Matron and she stared back resolutely, neither willing to look away.

“I feel this is not somewhere we should discuss these matters,” Lecter’s voice cut through like a hot knife, making Will blink, look away, “perhaps Mr. Price can help, he is adept at...”

“No,” Will said tightly, lips a thin line.

“No?” Lecter said, head tipped slightly to the side.

“You heard me,” Will muttered, stalking through the familiar rooms, seeing the current occupants looking on concernedly, the past and the present, the memory and the reality, *the truth and the lie.*

“You still hold onto them, don’t you?”

It had come out of the blue, as he was fixing his tie into place in the mirror. Slowly, Chilton looked over his shoulder towards his luxurious king-sized bed, currently housing a prostrate and distinctly naked Tobias Budge twisted within rumpled sheets. It was a nice image, *one he had enjoyed on many an occasion since he’d convinced Budge to join their ranks,* but at that moment it was tarnished by one thing.

In Budge’s hands he held pieces of his broken past. *In one the shattered mug, in the other the broken handle.* Staring at him, it took Chilton a moment to move, striding to the side of the bed and unceremoniously plucking the items from his lover’s hands. Budge looked up at him, surprised, *but not truly surprised.*

“She was right then, Bedelia,” Budge said, watching as Chilton put the mug and the piece of the handle on the nightstand carefully, “something precious.”

“I don’t need you sermonising at me,” Chilton said tightly, features pinched.

“I thought we were supposed to let go of our past,” caramel eyes watched him closely, “isn’t that what you said?”

“Tobias...”

“Isn’t that what you *said*,” the man repeated, sitting up, the covers falling away from his chest.

Chilton stopped fussing with his ornaments and licked at his lips.

Lonely .

After everything that happened that day, *that day so long ago when his life as a human had been changed into something else, something more, something he never asked for* , he had been inexorably lonely. Left to scavenge in the underbelly of the world, eking out a living on bones already gnawed, and being so fucking *lonely.*

He'd missed his family the most. His wife's beautiful, sad smile. And his son, his little Charles always so full of joy and love for him. Some days, he thought he might let himself die because the pain of living was too much. The pain of knowing he could never go back. *But that picture in his mind always stopped him at the last gasp, of his son grinning at him, giggling.*

When he'd been found he was sure he must have been a sorry sight, and yet...the Verger twins had taken pity on him. Or what he'd assumed to be pity at the time. Only later did he understand they'd seen his potential, as he lay in the gutter staring up at those who walked by. And they'd been right.

"I've said a lot of things," Chilton shrugged dismissively, "not all of them necessarily set in stone. If you don't evolve, you die. That I understand."

"Then why are you still pining over scraps?" Tobias climbed onto his knees and shuffled towards him, lifting his arms until he could snake them around Chilton's neck, leaning his head against a shoulder.

A moment's silence. Chilton sighed, shaking his head, "Perhaps everything is finally coming together and..." he looked away, "I wasn't entirely prepared for this."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Budge said, voice hard, "You brought us here, you are *ready*."

"When you say these things I realise how young you are," Chilton said, maudlin, "you have no idea what we went through to get here. No idea of the danger..."

"I may be young but I'm not stupid," Tobias said, eyes boring into his, "We're all working towards a common goal! Once we find it, we can be free, all of us!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself..."

"We're your family now," Budge said, hand at his cheek, "*we're* important. *We're* the ones you need to look after."

Taking a deep breath, Chilton nodded. The kiss was hollow, even though he tried his best to give himself freely. Thinking of his family only ever served to pull him back towards the gutter, even as he strove to claw his way to freedom.

"I must prepare for my meeting with Bedelia," Chilton said, "She has something for us."

That night there was no moon. The clouds in the sky held the sickly sheen of the streetlights, moving quickly in the storm driven winds. It howled around them as they rushed through the well-manicured garden like phantoms.

Quick fingers took care of the security system. He was learning quickly that Buddish had a way with machinery. The grizzled man gestured to him, features stiff, and Chilton slipped quietly inside.

It had been ten years now, since he'd been recruited. A decade of searching that had so far come up fruitless. When the Vergers had pulled him from the jaws of death it had seemed to be with a promise of something greater. And Frederick Chilton had taken it because, at that moment, his want for life had been greater than his want for death. Now, years later, he would admit even he was beginning to believe that their crusade might be nothing but a pipe dream.

“You and Eva go to the right,” he whispered to Buddish and the long-haired woman sneaking in after them.

“But Mason said to follow him upstairs...” Eva started.

“Do not make me repeat myself,” Chilton said sternly; she recoiled from him, not meeting his eyes, before trotting off with Buddish around the grand staircase and through a door.

The house was a stunning display of opulence. As he kept to the wall, sneaking further and further into its bowels, he wondered if perhaps this time they would find what they were looking for. Mason Verger and his sister Margot had done a decent job of finding half breeds and pure breeds from across their area, grouping them together towards a common goal. In his years as an Unnatural Chilton had never heard of such a thing. He tended to find that most Unnaturals disliked cooperation, preferring solitude, and even those that preferred company wouldn’t risk attracting the attention of the Registry in order to sate that need.

And yet, here they were. An organised group with a goal, working right under the nose of the Registry. Someday, they would be free. That was the carrot before the donkey. Freedom. *However, he wasn't stupid enough to believe that it was only them. There was more influence to their gang than even the Vergers could affect, and he'd caught glimpses, oveheard things here that made him suspicious. And yet even after all these years the Vergers refused to tell even him who the mastermind behind their plan was.*

“No need for the little piggies to know all the secrets,” Mason would giggle to himself, pinging his finger into Chilton’s nose like a child.

“Quiet Mason,” Margot would say, running a hand through her perfectly coifed hair, “you’re such a bore. Ignore him Fred. Everything will make sense, I promise. Have faith.”

And now they were here, on orders from above, the mysterious figure who ran their ragtag group, who supplied them with information they couldn’t possibly know unless they were getting it from the Registry itself. The adrenaline was pumping hard in his veins, as it always did when they broke into property. Yet it was nothing compared to the spike that shot through him at the scream.

The scream. He would remember it until the day he died, he was sure of it. High pitched and wriggling. He found himself running terrified back towards the main hall, slipping on the polished floor before the stairs. As he righted himself and grabbed the banister, that was when the wretched, sickening sound of tearing began, and then the sloppy sound of flesh and insides, and the rushing spill of blood after blood after blood splattering against parquet flooring.

Looking up had been difficult, mainly because he didn’t think he could overcome the terror holding him in its grip. But when he did, neck muscles straining, fingers like claws around the wood, it was to see ***him.***

Walking calmly down the stairs was a man in a well tailored three-piece suit, tall and regal in bearing. In one hand he held Mason’s legs and pelvis, intestines dangling from inside like streamers. In the other was his torso, arms hanging limp, head lolling with bloated tongue and bulging eyes. It was mesmerising in a way, as the shock began to set in. Each step seemed to him like a death knell.

What was this monster? *he had thought to himself then as the man he had then only known as Lecter from the information they were given, stopped at the bottom of the stairs beside him and*

divested himself of the ruined form of Mason Verger. He fell with a heavy wet sound to the floor. Lecter sniffed, reaching up for the pocket square tucked neatly in his breast pocket, unfurling it with bloody fingers.

"Coming into my home uninvited," the man said calmly, looking straight ahead; when Lecter turned to look at him directly, Chilton thought he felt his legs shaking, his throat constrict, "most rude, wouldn't you agree?"

He barely heard the sound of running feet, but the appearance of his colleagues as they rounded the corner caught his eye. The sound of Eva's gasp, Buddish and Stammets, and Margot's scream of fury and pain.

Now, *he'd thought,* we're all together, we need to kill him now! *And yet, when Margot had rushed forwards, hand drawn back, claws out, Lecter had merely turned to her and with one word:* ***"HALT",*** *and the woman he credited with helping save his life all those years ago, so strong and proud, suddenly went limp and stood above her brother's corpse like a mannequin. They all stopped, stunned into silence and inactivity by the bizarre and horrifying nature of what they were watching, as Lecter stepped forwards and took Margot's face in his hands.*

Oh god, oh god, oh god don't! *He'd screamed in his mind at the thought of seeing her die before his eyes. He had opened his mouth before he knew what he was going to do.*

"Stop!"

And the monster had, hands stilling in their morbid path. The room seemed to hold its breath as this walking, talking murderous demon turned its maroon eyes towards him and waited. Shaking, blinking, Chilton froze.

"Oh?" Lecter said, Margot's face still cupped in his hands, "I had thought your order was perhaps a preface of some sort."

"I..." Chilton choked, "please..."

Shaking his head, Lecter tutted, "I do hope you aren't about to plead. It's so tiresome."

"W-we won't..." mind rushing, he had watched Lecter's hands tighten and tighten.

Dropping to his knees had seemed the only way forwards. Looking plaintively at the others, Chilton had signalled for them to follow suit. Soon they were all on the ground, bent over in supplication.

"We're sorry," he said because there was nothing else to say, "please forgive us."

And he listened and listened and waited, until he realised there were no sounds of dismemberment or breaking bone or tearing flesh. Chancing a look up, he found Lecter smiling unpleasantly down at him. Letting go of Margot, Lecter appeared to remove his influence, watching her carefully. She was trembling, but Chilton knew it was with anger rather than fear. Her eyes were bloodshot, fingers tightly held in fists. When she knelt down it was slow and torturous, lowering herself down onto ground thick with her brother's gore.

"Well, now isn't this a little more civilised," Lecter had said calmly, wiping some blood from his face, "Let me guess, little lambs. Doctor Du Maurier has tried again."

When Margot flinched, looking up in shock, Chilton had found a name to hate. That had been the first time he'd heard of Bedelia Du Maurier.

"If it is not too impolite to ask, where are we going?"

When Will had reached the Bentley first and taken the driver's seat, no one had protested. Lecter had taken the passenger seat, and Hannah had secreted herself in the backseat once again. Driving had been something at least, soothing in its monotony. *A thing for his raging mind to focus on, even as it tore itself apart to find the answers it wanted.*

It was odd that Lecter spoke first. To Will at least, ever since Hannah had arrived he had fallen back into the mantle of *son* . Waiting for their mother to question their every move, and yet...she had been oddly silent when he had expected her to have words to say. Now, he found himself looking to the man next to him, watching him calmly. He wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"Miriam wasn't an Unnatural, I would have fucking known it!" Will said tightly.

"You can be so sure?"

"She was normal, nice and *normal* ," Will punctuated the word, "and that's what I loved about her the most. None of *this* bullshit," Will spat, "the fucking mess that comes with magic and monsters and...fuck," he slowed at the lights, jerking up the handbrake, "sorry. Didn't mean to..."

"Perfectly understandable," Lecter said, nodding.

"Could you *stop* being so polite when I'm being such an asshole?" Will leaned his head back against the headrest and took a long breath.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, oh," Will looked at Lecter out of the corner of his eye.

"Very well," the man was smiling, "next time, I will remember to be suitably outraged."

It was impossible to resist returning that smile. *When did you fall so hard, huh?* If asked, he doubted he'd be able to pinpoint the moment, but it was there nevertheless. Clearing his throat, Will remembered Hannah in the backseat and put his eyes back on the road, lowering the handbrake and moving out into traffic.

"I want to confirm it, there is a way we can confirm it," Will said, "Miriam, I mean."

"You're not thinking of..." he heard Hannah's anger, cutting her off quickly.

"*No* , not the Registry. They can't help. The Aman that covers registration is missing."

"Missing?" Lecter raised a brow, "I would have thought that an impossibility."

"Yeah, well that makes two of us," Will said softly.

"So? You have an alternative?" Lecter asked.

“I have an alternative,” Will said, hoping he wasn’t simply taking his head from the crocodile’s mouth only to put it straight into the lion’s.

Sitting on her bed, Abigail stared at the floor beneath her feet. *What’s even keeping you here?* She asked herself for the millionth time. *What are you even doing here?*

It had been difficult, deciding to run in the first place. For so long now her mother and her father had been all she had. They were her world, and she was theirs.

‘No one else is gonna understand you, darlin,’ her father would say, ‘ *no one else if gonna accept you like we do’* .

And she hadn’t the courage to test his words, be they truth or lie. Growing up in a bubble, always apart, always outside looking in. But then...

“Thanks sweetheart, I appreciate it.”

Will had taken her in on a chance, on a hope, without expecting anything else in return. Part of her would always resent how much he cared for her, tried to protect her from the world, in the same way she resented her parents that same thing. If he would treat her like an adult, let her make her own choices, maybe she could see her mother again, maybe she could be just like Will and not care about the consequences. Maybe...

But then ‘ *maybe’* wasn’t good enough, not now. She’d mixed him up in all this mess by not being strong enough to break free from her obligation, not being strong enough to care about her own principals over and above other people’s wants and desires.

If only she had never agreed to do what father wanted, *the things he told her would keep them all safe,* maybe all those people wouldn’t have died.

Maybe mom would be alive.

Wiping away the tears on her cheeks seemed insulting, somehow, but she did it anyway. Standing up, she walked to the tall wardrobe filled with new, pretty clothes, and pulled out the baggy jeans and flannel shirt Will had loaned her, putting them on.

Her parents had always done all they could to protect her, and so had Will. Maybe...maybe it was time for her to return the favour.

The room seemed to mourn her loss as she walked through the door. On the bedside table the raven-heart charm was abandoned next to the lamp, leaves curling dry around its core, bereft.

“Please, Bev, I need your help. This is important. I can't tell you why, just...please.”

No matter how much he had pleaded with her, the voice of the woman on the other end of the phone hadn’t moved an inch. It seemed Beverly Katz drew the line at exhuming bodies behind her boss's back. When he’d tried Zeller all he got was an answering machine message.

Sitting in the Bently, hands tight around the wheel, Will Graham had taken a deep breath and pressed forwards. It seemed, right now, that they were on their own.

The trees were still, as if the air was afraid to move and disturb the peace. Leaving the car parked on the road, Will walked steadily along a well known route through the bushes and headstones. A quiet like no other, out here, among the dead.

When he'd been younger, just beginning to understand the practices of necromancy, he'd always feared cemeteries would be terrifyingly loud places. *As if the dead would sense his feet walking above them, and reach out in jealousy to clutch at him.* A naïve thought, from a mind desperate to rationalise life and death, turn them into something he could understand. *Alive was good, dead was bad.* It took many years of study and coming to terms with his own mortality to know that things were never that clear cut, that black and white.

Sometimes being alive was hell. Sometimes being dead was a peace some could only wish for.

And sometimes , he thought as he stared at the gravestone before him, *some are left neither living nor dead.*

Miriam Lass
1986 – 2018
Beloved by all who knew her,
now resting in peace

He wished it was true. More than anything, he wished it. The quiet became difficult to bear, as he stared at the shine of the sun on the grey stone. And there...

... behind it, hands, fingers first, slipping up and over the stone to grip at it, knuckles white ...

Will stayed calm, even as he watched the top of a head peak up and over the monument to his friend's eternal rest, milky eyes peering at him. A voice spoke, *as if it were tickling at his ear, breath putrid* .

Never, never, never. You kept me here. I will never see the other side.

"Will?" a hand at his arm made him jump; turning, he found Hannah there, watching him with concern.

Swallowing, he held her stare, "I'll need your help for this. You know that, don't you?"

Her mute understanding continued its reverie, and Will didn't know if it was comforting or not. Part of him wanted her to talk him out of this, part of him wanted her to scold him, *part of him wanted to ask her who the woman in the photograph was...*

"You'll need a piece of her bone, to know for sure," Hannah eventually said as Hannibal approached them, weaving his way through the gravestones.

"Then help me," Will said fervently, "this is important. You know how important this is."

"I told you years back, you should have let her go," Hannah's face was stern but sad.

"Help me," Will said, feeling his voice shake, " *please* ."

They worked as seamlessly as they always had, predicting each other's movements, complimenting each other's thoughts and motions. The practice of two so connected as they were was always

strong. *A magic blessed by blood and time . A bond as hard as tree resin exuded to cover a deep wound.*

Setting up the ritual did not take long, and still, somehow, it was disquieting that Lecter stood off to the side and merely watched. He had asked no questions about what was proceeding, for which Will was glad. Yet, in a way, he wished he would at least be a little curious. Without it, Will could almost wonder that the man had been expecting this outcome all along.

Finding himself sat across from his mentor, his Matron, *his mother* , Will crossed his legs and relaxed. *There was no place here for doubts and fears. Only confidence. Only a single focus.*

"You're ready then," Hannah said after a pause.

Nodding, Will set his shoulders, "I am."

A single thread , that was how he always imagined it. *A single thread, connecting them no matter how far away from each other they became* . It stretched from his chest, *his heart* , to hers, shimmering like gossamer. Closing his eyes against the distractions of the real world, the string appeared to become brighter, singing in the darkness. And beneath them...

A network of loose threads, floating in the ground, wavering, *cut.* The unattached strings danced below them like a shoal of seaweed, glittering in the dark. And below them, *directly below* , was a wavering string the hue of blood.

Even as he opened his mouth to speak in unison with his Matron, Will could feel the tear slip from his closed eye, along the valley by his nose, and into his mouth as he spoke.

"Droichead, lámh ag síneadh amach."

With his eyes closed he could not see it, though he knew from the sound that the earth was moving.

"Droichead, lámh ag glacadh mianach."

The string seemed to flicker and twitch, as if searching for the one that called it higher, reaching and grasping.

"Droichead, glacadh le cara, caillte le fada."

The smell of overturned soil, the fresh smell of tilled earth, the must of things long rotted. The red string swam and pulled higher and higher, fighting to reach them.

"Buaileann na mairbh leis an mbeo."

Opening his eyes was an effort. Not because he was tired, but because he wasn't sure he wanted to see it. *The coffin he'd seen three years ago, shining walnut lined with silver, surrounded by family weeping, father in the mother's arms, inconsolable, rows upon rows of colleagues and top brass, the priest speaking useless words of comfort, and then him. Standing numb and hollow by Jack Crawford, staring at the wooden box as if it were a terrifying totem, something to represent the truth of his loss. All he'd been able to do was watch as it was lowered out of sight, four words tripping from his mouth carelessly.*

"Slán a fhágáil anois."

Now, it was before him once more, dirty and worn, the sheen gone in place of filth and marks against the beautiful wood. *Yet, somehow he felt as if he were there again. Feelings rushing, flash flood, drowning.* Nothing you can do now. Nothing you can do for her accept make it right.

“Do I have permission?” Will asked, clearing his throat as the words stuck, choking out, “I mean, tabhair cead dom?”

Hannah nodded to him. Will sat up into a kneel and headed to the bottom of the casket, unscrewing the cover and opening the locking mechanism. Hearing the click made his stomach jump. As he took a hold of the lid and pulled up, lifting the heavy piece, the scent that erupted was foul enough to make him gag. Pushing the lid back he let it fall on its hinges, standing up and away from the remains with an instinctual human need to be distant from death.

Only...eyes wide, the air caught in his throat and Will choked, hand over his mouth...

No. No that's impossible. That's not possible.

“What on earth?” he heard Hannah say in disgust as she stood at his side, looking down into the casket.

“Oh my god,” Will said, an incoherent sound of grief leaving him; his hands came up to grab at his hair and he felt the tears fall, “ *oh god please don't...”*

“What is wrong? Will..?” Lecter was rushing to his side, taking him by the shoulders to keep him steady as he too looked down at the remains.

Remains of something distinctly inhuman. *It was like a nightmare* . An elongated head with large canines, a long body with four legs, a tail. *He wanted to wake up.* Will tried to speak but he couldn’t. Nothing but a sound of pain, hard and cut off as soon as it was ejected from between clenched teeth.

He wasn’t sure, he didn’t remember reaching down to pick up the skull, but when he blinked again it was in his hands. Smooth and cold.

“Is this her?” he heard Lecter ask, “Was she a Were? Or perhaps a Shifter?”

“No,” Will said quietly, barely able to speak as he stared into the sockets, “it’s...it's not her. It’s not her body.”

“Who would do this?” Hannah asked; she sounded appalled, “this is desecration.”

“I know who did this,” Will whispered, kneeling to place the skull back with its body, “I know.”

It was too much. Sometimes, it was too much. The few things he had left to cling to seemed to crumble beneath his hands and he was falling from the cliff, into the waters waiting below. *The waves crashed, churning him against the rocks, refusing to let him surface.* As he turned to leave, the sound of cars crunching across the gravel walkways reached him as if through ears filled with water, *like drumbeats, echoing.*

Will felt like he were wading rather than walking. As he stared at the people exiting the cars, rushing towards them, he wasn’t sure what to expect. They were blurry at first, *and he thought perhaps it was the water between them, distorting* , only to remember the tears in his eyes. When a

tall blur rushed towards him, it slowly coalesced into something familiar. Something he hadn't expected to see.

Jack Crawford .

It felt like a fate of some kind.

He was shouting, he was furious.

But he could be certain that Crawford's anger was nothing in comparison to his own.

Will lifted his hands and brought them together with a word, *"peacach",* before shoving both hands palms first against Crawford's chest. The man made a loud wheezing groan, as if the wind had been knocked from his lungs, and crumpled to his knees. Will stood above him, shaking, terrible eyes downcast on the man below him, *incandescent with rage* . He was vaguely aware of the other visitor, *Beverly Katz, all tense and ready, reaching for her gun.* Will knew she must have informed Jack of his intentions, and berrated himself for putting his faith in her. Behind him, he could hear rushing footsteps approaching.

"You...you did this," Will found himself saying, voice hollow, wavering.

Jack was struggling to swallow in air, raising his eyes to lock their stare. And he knew, *Will knew he did* , he knew what Will meant. He knew because he had done it, after all. All he could think, as Katz levelled her weapon and shouted for him to "Back off!" was that, at the very least, Crawford had the good grace to look ashamed.

"I think this may be getting a little out of hand," Will heard Lecter say from behind him.

"You might want to put that gun away, my dear," Hannah, sounding wise but worried.

"You gave her..." Will took a moment to close his eyes and choke back a cry, blinking them open again, "you gave her to them, didn't you."

"I d-didn't hav-have a choice," Crawford struggled out.

Will saw red. He'd lunged before he realised what he'd done, teeth bared in a snarl, grabbing Crawford by the lapels of his coat and shaking him, faces mere inches apart.

"Jack Crawford, no one gets past him!" Will shouted, feeling the *power surge* feeling the *wildness loosing from its leash* , "His rule is law, he's a man for justice!" the sound of cracking stone, the sound of shouts for someone to 'move out of the way!', but he couldn't stop, "Except when the Registry comes calling, he turns round and bends over, *that it?* Is it? Is it! You fucking handed them her dead body, you let those disgusting fucks take her! Let them take her corpse and now she can't even rest, you piece of shit!" the creak and break of wood, the sound of things moving in the air, "You sick fucking bastard, how could you. How *could you!?"*

It came to the crest, the wave peaking high, before it tumbled down. Will shoved the winded man backwards, before dropping to his knees with a wail. *He couldn't, he couldn't anymore* . Everything poured out, *a dam bursting,* he cried so hard he choked again and again, hands around his middle trying desperately to hold the pain inside. All around them he could hear the sound of heavy things falling, heavy things breaking, heavy things crashing together. But he couldn't pay attention to it, could do nothing but scream at the thought.

Her body, trapped in that awful place. The infamous basement labs of the Registry, where things went in and never came out. His friend, hidden there like a labelled specimen, being subjected to god knows what. Never being allowed to rest.

Never being allowed to rest.

When arms slipped around him Will fell into the embrace, *a child desperate for solace* .

“It’s alright,” a voice was saying by his ear, *Hannah’s voice* , “it’s alright darling, please stop now. It’s going to be alright.”

“Please, please,” his voice was strangled to a whisper, face twisted with anguish, “*please* , I don’t want it to be true. Make it stop. *Make it stop.* ”

“Calm, shh, shh, calm now,” she stroked his hair and he held her close in return, weeping without the ability to stop.

It was almost transcendent. Seeing such power possessed by so pure a soul, seeing that raw capacity for feeling transmuted into kinetic energy, potential energy, heat and light, lifting and flinging and cracking and breaking. Hannibal Lecter stood and watched as Will Graham unknowingly tore apart the cemetery around him as if it were nothing but a cheap imitation movie set.

The gravestones sheared in half as if pulled and twisted by invisible hands. Tree boughs swayed and bent, cracking with awful sounds. The grass twirled up like flocks of birds. They flew into the air, they flew into each other, they lifted into the sky as if it were perfectly natural that they should be there.

And then he saw the pistol, and it was instinct to move. He would admit to himself, later when he was alone, that he might be surprised at how easily he put himself between the business end of a gun and Will Graham’s life.

“Move out of the way!” Katz was shouting, even though her eyes were shocked by what they were seeing.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Lecter said as Will finished screaming at the man he held, screaming as if to impart the terror and the pain onto Crawford, to rid himself of it.

“I mean it, I’ll shoot!” she said, knuckles white.

And for a moment, he thought she might. Thought she might panic and put a bullet in his chest, except her need to hold him at gun point ended as suddenly as it had begun. Katz let out a short sound of exclamation as Will collapsed to his knees, and then they could do nothing but watch as the debris in the air started to return to where it came from. *Gravity was exerting itself once again* .

Rocks and tree branches and grass and flowers and keepsakes left on graves, the things landed all around them, some with heavy thuds that could be felt through the earth on which they stood. Katz holstered her gun and ducked down, covering her head, as did Crawford, Hannah ran to Will and cradled him gently, muttering platitudes.

Hannibal simply stood amidst it all with a sense of achievement.

The locks were coming apart. The ties were loosening. The truth of Will's being was finding its way out through the knots and bindings keeping it hidden.

A becoming.

By the time he stopped scanning the destruction, he noticed Katz helping Crawford to his feet. The man's eyes were bloodshot, but he was trying his best to look unaffected.

"I'll call for backup," Katz said, voice wavering.

"Do you think that wise, Agent Crawford?" Lecter asked, eyes steady as they locked with Jack's, "that might involve some explanation on your part in relation to illegal burial."

Crawford's lip twitched and he muttered something, then let out a sound of frustration. Reaching up he halted Katz's movements, making her blanch.

"Stand down," he said angrily.

"But..." Katz tried to protest.

"You heard me, Katz, give it a god damned rest!"

She looked conflicted, but appalled, as if trying her best not to believe the truth. That Jack's reluctance to act against this blatant hostility was tantamount to proclaiming his guilt.

That Miriam Lass's grave was nothing but a farce .

"Jesus Christ," Katz murmured, rubbing at her lips, shaking her head, "this is insane."

And, for a moment, the world was quiet. After the turmoil it seemed bereft without the cacophony of noise and clamour of destruction. Around them the breeze blew in the leaves and the birds squawked in the trees. In Hannah's arms, Will had calmed to a dazed state as she slowly brushed a hand across his curls.

No one seemed to know how to address the elephant in the room. Which was perhaps why it was fortuitous that Crawford's phone rang, shrilling out into the quiet. He rushed to answer, jamming his hand in his pocket.

"Crawford," he said automatically, brow furrowing, "what? You're sure?" taking a breath, Jack rubbed at his forehead and nodded to no-one, "I understand. Where? Good. We'll be there in ten."

Hanging up, Jack appeared to notice he had the attention of everyone. All except Will, who Lecter noted was staring at a singular point ahead of him as if he could see something there that no one else could. Sighing, Crawford pocketed his phone.

"It's official, they're escalating," he said grimly, staring out at the gravestones littered around them like broken teeth, "There's been another."

Chapter End Notes

beannacht breacadh an lae - dawn’s blessing

Droichead, lámh ag síneadh amach - A bridge, a hand reaching out
Droichead, lámh ag glacadh mianach - A bridge, a hand taking mine
Droichead, glacadh le cara, caillte le fada - A bridge, an embrace of a friend, long lost
Buaileann na mairbh leis an mbeo - The dead meet the living

slán a fhágáil anois – goodbye for now

Peacach - Sinner

link for picture of Anneal symbol : cliparts101.com/free_clipart/44263/Anneal

Resin (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

> Just wanted to say thanks so much for all the support, from the lovely comments to the kudos! I have a little time off at the moment so hopefully can get a decent set of chapters out before heading back to work ☝

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shapes and sounds. They didn't seem to connect. The semantic triangle was broken, and objects were without name, sitting before his eyes.

I breathe in. *I breathe out* .

She was still there, crouched before him, hunched like only a wounded animal could be, protecting its vitals. *Only she had none* . Miriam Lass was like all the other things he laid eyes on; an object without a name. Her eyes were staring at the ground, half hidden behind her filthy hair, and her mouth in a rictus grin. Clothes ruined and dirty, skin blue-tinged.

In his peripheral he could see human shapes moving, talking. *Disconnected.* Part of him wanted her image gone forever. Part of him wished to crawl forwards, gather her into his arms and beg her.

Forgive us. Please.

It wouldn't ever be true. That he was sure of. Around him, he could feel Hannah's arms, still vice tight. Leaning against her strength was all he could do, watching as those eyes lifted from the ground, further and further, making him squirm. When they connected, it was like being judged.

NEVER LET HER GO

And then a blink, a simple closing of his eyes and an opening of them again, and she was gone. Nothing but broken stone and brown earth beneath grey sky. Will took a deep breath, feeling the itchy soreness of his face, the red raw at his eyes, the drained limbs resting against the ground. It was difficult, even as he strained all of his energy, to reach up a hand and route around in his jacket, fishing through inner pockets sewn into the lining.

Scrawled notes.

Etched symbols.

Deer felt.

Eagle feathers tied with sinew.

In the fifth pocket he found them, pulling one out and popping it into his mouth. It tasted vile, as always, *like moulding mown grass and mud* . A little piece of earth, a little piece of home, *a little piece of blessed Wolf Trap ground.* It was nothing more than a last resort, he knew that. Tiny

nuggets of earth from his garden, but they were potent, *too much for regular consumption* . Only once before had he ever had to ingest such strong magic, and at that moment it wasn't best to dwell on it. As he chewed the dried sod dutifully, Will almost wished he could *blink* and have her back.

Just to ask her, once more.

Forgive me.

Things became sharper; *the pain in his face, the sounds around him, the forms standing stark against the sky.* The world was shaking back into focus and Will felt guiltily normal, *guiltily whole.* Sometimes, he wondered whether he deserved to know what that was like, or if there would be a day when he no longer fought the inevitable.

Still have to make things right , he thought to himself as he got warily to his feet, Hannah standing up and fussing with him, asking him how he felt.

"I'm going to report to the Cemetery Keeper," Jack was saying, rubbing at his neck, "tell him that we came to...came to visit and found it like this. Katz, I want you to do a once around the area and see if there's anyone we missed. I do *not* want to be reading about this in tomorrow's *Tattler* ."

When Will looked to the small group of colluders, he couldn't help feeling as if he was pulling them all closer to a bloody end. Walking around with targets on their backs. *Just like Miriam.* His chest felt tight. Will tried to keep his thoughts stable.

Katz looked pale, shaken, as if her world had been rocked. She avoided his eyes, before taking the out Jack had presented and turning to walk stiffly out through the rubble in search of prying eyes.

"Dr. Lecter, I understand I am in no position to ask, but I would appreciate a set of practiced eyes at our crime scene..." Jack was saying to Lecter, the man still standing almost precisely between himself and Jack; Lecter's silhouette was stark, almost too much contrast between his black overcoat and the sky, like a cut-out.

How long before you admit it, and stop calling him a man? Will thought grimly, even as he opened his mouth.

"And what am I, chopped liver?" Will asked coolly; he saw Jack perk up, stepping out from behind Lecter to make eye contact. His brazen stare was reassuring, at least. *Jack would always be Jack, no matter how Will felt* .

"I need you out of here, home, with Dr. Bloom, with your Matron, *wherever* ," Jack said steadily, "but nowhere near that crime scene. You can't control yourself."

Pursing his lower lip and shrugging his shoulders, Will couldn't help the vitriol, "Pot kettle black," he said tonelessly.

He might have missed it, if he hadn't been looking for it; *Jack blanched, but hid it well beneath a scowl.* It hadn't been difficult, to see the doubts and fears and sins of the man, floating around in his head, unable to keep them deep and dark where they should stay. *Seeing him with Freddie Lounds, hands red with guilt as they exchanged information, was a simple sin to slip from the top of the pile,* "Don't give me your shit, Graham. I've stuck my neck out for you enough in one day."

"I want to see it," Will insisted, "I *need* to see it."

“Will, honey I think he’s right,” Hannah was saying sagely, brushing down her clothes of grass and dirt caught against fabric, “you need to rest.”

“Plenty of time for that,” Will rolled his neck, eyes closing with a wince at a pain in his right shoulder; opening them was tricky. *Met by maroon, watching him closely, as if captivated.*

“Sleep when we’re dead?” Lecter offered.

“Right,” Will said, unable to look away; when it became odd, a beat too long, Will swallowed and gestured to Jack, “tell him you agree me.”

“I agree with Will,” Lecter said, ever chivalrous.

“I wasn’t asking for your opinion, Doctor,” Jack said tightly, eyes set, “just your assistance.”

“You can’t keep me away from this case, *not now* ,” Will said, tucking his hands up under his armpits, “you started this, Jack. You started all of this. You owe me that. You *do,* ” Will spat, noticing Jack getting ready to protest further, “don’t fucking deny it. *Don’t* .”

“...You’re not stable,” Jack tried to argue fruitlessly.

“Never have been. Didn’t bother you before.”

“Not like this.”

“How would *you* know?” Will said with an off-putting stare, “as long as you get what you want, it doesn’t matter what gets broken along the way. That right?”

A long breath, puffed out into cold air like a sleeping dragon, Jack looked down at the ground, hands in his pockets. It was difficult to watch, to acknowledge that someone else held him in their hands, a little doll to position how they willed, controlling his movements, *constricting.* Eventually, Jack simply turned and started walking back towards the cars, parked haphazardly on the gravel. Clearing his throat, Will managed a cruel smile.

“Well, that was easier than I thought.”

Only, taking a step forwards wasn’t. Will felt a swell in his chest, a swarming daze that puffed up out of his lungs and into his head, making his vision dim, then brighten, and his legs trip, falling. Hannah made a distressed sound from behind him, but it was strong arms that halted his descent. Strong hands that held him close, taking all of the responsibility away from his feet for holding him up. Will found himself having grabbed onto the lapels of Lecter’s coat, looking up at an amused face.

“Careful there,” Hannibal said, voice close.

“Thanks,” Will mumbled, trying his best to stand up straight; *he thought he could feel a heartbeat, and was unsure whose it was,* “and for backing me up, I mean,” feeling a flutter of happiness at the man’s genuine smile.

“Best to agree with someone when they are right, I always find,” Hannibal said, eyes playful; then, a subtle shift, *squinting a little in concern* , “you are exhausted.”

“Yeah,” Will didn’t try to lie, even as he slowly pushed back, making sure he was steady before letting go of his anchor, “but that’s just tough, isn’t it. No rest for the wicked,” he quipped, dusting himself down, “would you do me a favour?”

“I find it difficult to refuse you,” Lecter said, smile still in place.

“Huh,” Will laughed softly, “well then you won’t mind getting the car and bringing it up here? I don’t think I can walk back down the hill.”

“Of course,” nodding, Lecter watched him carefully, as if assessing whether or not Will was about to keel over, before turning and walking back up the track towards the road.

Nothing remained except the sound of open air, rushing, and wildlife slowly crawling back into the area. It always seemed that animals were the first to scatter at the sign of dangerous magics. Now, it was reassuring to hear birdsong in the nearby trees, and insects in the air. *And there, at the very edge of his vision, he could see it. The coffin, still sitting there, erroneous, pitting out his stomach like a drop from a cliff.*

Taking a long, deep breath until his lungs hurt, Will turned towards Hannah and let it out. The wizened woman had been suspiciously quiet, which Will took as a bad sign. It was confirmed on seeing her eyes, dark and penetrating. Will fidgeted, but stood his ground.

“Serious,” she said, lifting her chin to regard him along her nose, “more than you let on. I know you don’t like to talk to me about these things, always such a secretive boy, but for the sake of the goddess, Will! How long has it been *this bad* ?”

“This bad?” Will tried to think, scratching at his eye and letting out a shaky breath while he stalled, “Uh, about...when you called last. Only, it wasn’t like this. It was...it’s worse, now,” sighing, he reached up with shaky fingers and zipped up his jacket with difficulty.

“Leathcheann tú,” she said, voice taught, judgemental, “chomh mífhreagrach!”

“Sea, b’fhéidir,” Will nodded, swallowing down the hollow feeling, “ach tá mo chúiseanna agam.”

Stalling wasn’t what he had hoped she would do. Will had hoped for anger, disappointment, chastisement. Not hesitation. Hesitation was damning. Hanging his head, Will slipped his left hand into his jeans pocket and felt the slim photograph there.

“Let me ask,” Will said, licking his lower lip, “...can I ask you something?”

Hannah sighed, waving for him to continue.

“What’s a thing that can’t be put back once it’s been brought out?”

“This is no time for riddles,” she said tightly.

“Maybe this is exactly the right time for this one,” Will said, feeling the dizzy swell once more; closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and blinked them back open, “well?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said too quickly.

“Oh,” Will said, hating the pain in his chest, “and here I thought that was one you told me, long ago,” he lifted his eyes to watch her as he listened to the crunch of car tyres on gravel, “it’s a

secret," he said softly, watching her unmoving face, "that's the answer."

That she left without a word only made the ache worse. Closing his eyes, unnoticed tears slipped. *Another deep breath, as he lifted his face towards the sky* . He could almost pretend the water dripping from his skin was nothing but rain. Standing there, Will slowly removed his hand from his pocket, *leaving the secret hidden there, buried.*

The Seal had been a truth. From the moment he had seen it, Chilton knew. The Seal was truth, and it would lead them to what they wanted.

It hadn't been difficult, to pull in Unnaturals from far and wide, to bolster their numbers with members willing to do the dirty work. Since Mason's death Margot had been unwilling to put their little group in unnecessary danger; so familiars had been sought out and acquired. The promise of absolution was something many craved in this new world, ruled by the iron fist of the Registry. The ability to change, of being just like everyone else, it was almost mythical. But now, they felt they may have it in their grasp.

The shifters had been the most useful, in the end. Humans loved their pets *, he thought derisively. And animals were allotted even more freedom than Unnaturals in this world. Using shifters had given them almost full access to every potential candidate for the ritual. Finding shifters with magical ability had been the cherry on top of the sundae. Witches that could cast the Seal into mortar, brick and stone, in order to find the truth. Though Margot had been yet to tell them what exactly it was that the Seal revealled, or exactly what it was that they were looking for.*

Ever since Mason had been murdered, she had withdrawn. Sometimes he would watch her, when the others were occupied with staging break ins, setting up rituals; he would feel as if he were watching a spider sitting at the centre of its web, plucking the strings. It made him uneasy, but he didn't open his mouth. Wasn't worth the repercussions if she were to get upset. Margot's talents were singular among them, in her ability to cast illusions so real that even Chilton wondered if perhaps you could die from them were the belief strong enough.

He'd never thought to test the theory.

"Where are they?" Eva sat, fretting, twisting her hair into uncomfortable looking knots that made Chilton itch to fetch a brush.

"It's been two hours," Buddish, sitting by the window as he peered out, tried to sound calm but it was difficult.

"Give them ten more minutes," Margot said from her prone position on the bed, "then we'll go and..."

She hadn't been allowed to finish. Beneath them, the door banged open and there was the sound of a struggle. Chilton was on his feet in seconds, rushing downstairs with the others at his heels. It was dark. He snapped on the lights with a curse and stared. There, in the doorway, was the very thing they'd waited so long for. So long.

"Gave us a lot of trouble, this one."

Garrett Jacob Hobbs hefted the woman down from across his shoulder and she thumped unceremoniously onto the kitchen table with a huff of air against the gag across her mouth. Behind

him Chilton thought he could see the outline of his wife, Louise, keeping an eye out. But, despite his penchant for stealth, Chilton couldn't bring it in himself to care.

Miriam Lass. At last, someone who had triggered the Seal, someone worthy of the ritual. A saviour. For a moment, no one moved as the woman let out a groan of pain, eyes sharp as they flew around the room. Hobbs took the woman by the arm and shook her, muttering ' quiet, you!'

"Careful with her, you oaf!" Chilton said, rushing forwards.

And it was there. A smell, something different, something almost savoury. For a moment he closed his eyes and wished, hoped, more than anything that she was the one.

"Call Du Maurier," Margot's voice had cut through his reverie; when he turned to look at her she was stony faced, "we need Lecter."

Driving there was so much more effective than a phone call. Too impersonal, it would never work. It took a couple of hours, but that was just the way it had to be. Luckily for Will, Alana thought dryly, she wasn't willing to scrutinise why she continued to drop everything for a man who acted so hot and cold, *sometimes like a sweetheart and sometimes like an irredeemable jerk* .

Applesauce had been happy to see the neighbours at least, and Jackie, who was in her late sixties, had been overjoyed at the sight of Will's troupe. Alana had thanked her for watching them, letting Jackie know there were cookies cooling on the tray inside as she gave her the keys.

"Oh, you're a good one Bloom," Jackie had chuckled as she fussed with Angel's ears.

She hoped so. She really did.

It was raining by the time she got to Philly. Still, even with the lousy traffic and the heavy clouds, she found her way through the grid pattern like she'd never left. It had been only last year she'd still been working as a consultant here; after Will, after Miriam, after watching him get better, pulling him back from the brink, just to slip away from them all, out into the wilderness, it had been difficult to remain in Baltimore without everything bringing up bad memories. Being seconded to the Philidelphia Field Office had been a lifeline, one she'd grabbed with both hands. And she'd enjoyed it, for what it was, *a distraction* . Even if it couldn't last forever.

Driving past the small blocks of architectural gardens, the familiar building loomed into sight, all red brick and towering mirrored windows. Showing her pass at the entrance to the underground carpark had the clerk phoning upstairs for confirmation, but eventually she was permitted. A short journey from Basement 2 to the Ground Floor, pick up her temp pass, and make her way to the third floor. *Like stepping back in time.*

She got a few hellos as she walked the long corridors. When she found the office, it was almost bizarre. Setting her face to a smile, she entered with a short knock. Things had been moved around since she was last here. The desks that had sat in a figure six dice position were now two sets of four facing each other on either side of the room, with a bank of equipment on both sides of the door. At the back wall the door to the conference room was marked with a red card, *in progress* . But luckily, the man she was looking for was right where she expected him to be.

Short black hair, dark eyes, and a smile worth hanging around for, "Hey," he said, blinking, before his face glowed, "Alana *Bloom*? I didn't know we were expecting you!"

“Hi Ji-min,” Alana smiled, “neither did I.”

It was like she’d never left, and he was happy to see her, *mainly because she knew he’d been sad to see her go* . They spoke, which for a little while included him stopping to stare at her every few minutes and shake his head with a smile. ‘Alana Bloom’ he would say.

Eventually, sitting by his desk with a cooling cup of office coffee he’d fetched her, she managed to manoeuvre around to why she’d come in person instead of just calling.

“We’re having a bit of trouble at Quantico right now,” she said, pulling out a Report Number and handing it over, “Registry is being pretty strict on what we can and can’t look at.”

“Oh yeah?” Ji-min asked, watching her carefully, even as he took the scrap of paper and propped it into his keyboard, “you’re still dealing with the Ripper case, right? We got briefings too, but we’re lucky. Nothing’s appeared here, thank christ. So, you’re under the thumb huh?”

“Yeah. You know how it is.”

“I certainly do. And *you* know how I feel about bureaucrats,” Ji-min said, raising his brows.

“You used to work homicide in Orleans, didn’t you? Cause I have a favour to ask,” she smiled, “and then I was thinking that later you might like to take me to dinner.”

“Well,” Ji-min continued typing, even though he was darting his eyes to her every so often, “I wouldn’t want to stand you up.”

“It’s *not* a date,” Alana said, giving him a look, coy smile in place.

“And I’m *not* looking up the back catalogued case notes for that report number,” Ji-min said cockily, even as the man brought up screen after screen, putting in numbers, passwords; eventually he doubled clicked a file from a list and *bingo* . The report popped into life, “what’s this all about anyway?”

“We’re looking into cold cases that might be similar to our current case,” Alana didn’t count lying by omission, “but when I requested it,” she showed him the print out, “it came out redacted,” as she watched Ji-min scroll down, she sighed, “shit. Same here?”

“Yeah, sorry,” Ji-min said slowly as they both stared at the black boxes covering words, dates, names, large sections of the main body text; Alana waited, holding her breath while the man sat back in his chair, thinking, “well...I mean I could always contact my old Captain, at the NOPD. He might be able to tell me why it was redacted, but honestly it’s probably a Registry thing. When it comes to redaction, it usually is.”

“Yeah, I thought as much. Still, if you could ask your captain? Honestly, even a name would be enough. For the victim I mean.”

“Not going to tell me what this is really about, are you,” Ji-min said as he backed out of the report request screen.

“I wish I could,” she shrugged, tipping her head, “so, what am I getting treated to? Last time I was here it was Vietnamese.”

“There’s a new place on Sansom Street. Thai, delicious, atmosphere’s nice,” he said, even though he’d caught the clear diversion, “who knows, maybe I can booze you up and get you talking.”

“Ha, we’ll see. Meet you outside at six?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

The café was crowded at this time of day, the late-lunchers desperately trying to get served, constantly glancing at their watches or phones. Abigail sat in the middle of it all, staring down at the cup of coffee she had ordered. It remained untouched.

“You’re doing the right thing,” she said to herself for the hundredth time, “you’re doing the right thing. *Shit* .”

It was sunny and, despite the harassed vibe caused by thoughts of being late back to work, everyone seemed happy. The room was all white walls and pine furniture, glowing in the sunlight. Which was perhaps why it was such a contrast, when *she* walked in.

No one else noticed. Abigail was sure of that, because the patrons continued to simply chat around mouthfuls of food and laugh behind their hands and not even glance, *not even glance* , as the woman in the white suit walked between them as if she were one of them. Didn’t notice the drop in temperature, the strange scent on the air, the oppressive feeling shrouding them all. As she drew closer sound seemed to numb, *like a sudden cold stopping the particles from jostling in the air.*

It was difficult, but Abigail remained in her seat, eyes downcast. As black heels clacked into view, Abigail steadied her breathing and spoke.

“You’re...Doctor Du Maurier, right?”

“Hello Abigail,” she said, her voice smooth and soft.

And as she sat in the seat across from her, Abigail looked up, *and a scream formed in her throat.* Only it stuck there, choking, as Bedelia Du Maurier lifted her finger and placed it against her own red-painted lips.

A black face, taught like a skull, beneath twisting coils sprouting from her hair. Antlers, she thought at first, before she snapped her eyes shut. Breathing in slow, and out slow, *she could taste the scent of decaying earth, and rotting animals, fur, the scent of dew on leaves* . She wasn’t sure how long it was, between closing and opening, but when she did she found...

Roots. Not antlers jutting from the thing’s head, but twisting roots coiling up from within her blond hair, such a contrast to the ebony of her skin. The creature sat there, in the café, in the open, *easy as you please* . Abigail felt something hot and wet against her skin. Looking down, she saw she’d spilled her coffee, hands shaking, and grabbed for the napkin beside her. She mopped at the spill fervently.

“Now, now,” Bedelia said, “no need to be scared, little one. Unless...” she frowned, eyes penetrating, “you can see more than most.”

“I don’t know what you...” Abigail had tried the lie on her tongue, and thought maybe it would have worked if her voice hadn’t given her away; trembling, terrified.

“Come now, let’s not get off on the wrong foot,” she said, tutting, “I get the feeling you’ve seen someone like me before. It would take a practiced eye to see through a glamour such as mine. Is that right?”

A pause, *just breathing, keeping the scream from escaping* . Abigail forced herself to look up once more. The image seemed impossible, somehow. She had seen plenty Unnaturals in her life; she and her parents had got by on the friendship between half breeds, and every one had some form of malformation or trait that they glamoured or simply hid beneath clothing; *ears, fangs, tails, fur* . But this...

In front of her, she knew, was something that shouldn’t exist. A clear, full blooded Unnatural. Just as, earlier, Hannibal had shown himself, so was this woman now available to her eyes. Abigail wished she knew what was happening. Everyone knew, *everyone* knew it, that the Registry had wiped out all the full bloods decades ago. She remembered being taught about it at school. There were reasons that the Registry held such sway, was so feared by half bloods and those with magical ability. Their rule was law, and their reach was long. And yet...

Here, before her, was further proof that things were not as the Registry would have them think.

“So,” Bedelia said with a smile, a distinctly disconcerting sight on her skull-like face, “I believe we have business to attend to.”

“We’re sure?”

“As sure as can be.”

The rain pounded on the ratty, dilapidated roof. Somewhere, water fell in a torrent, slapping against the ground. The warehouse seemed more like a ship at sea than a ruined structure on land. Still, it was suitable for her talents, at least. Chilton watched as Margot Verger stared down at the woman by their feet, bound and gagged. Where they had taken her arm had healed well, the stump painted with symbols, most of which even he didn’t recognise. That was Lecter’s department.

It had been sickeningly odd, when Bedelia Du Maurier had become an official member of their group. After Mason was killed, Du Maurier had come waltzing out of the shadows and declared herself the patron they had never met. Only Margot had known of her existence. And Chilton had hated it. Du Maurier was too crisp and clean and charming to trust. And that she had sent them into the lion’s jaws without a second thought just to see what would happen, didn’t help.

“Honestly, we need Hannibal’s help,” Du Maurier had revealed as they all sat in her stunning townhouse, feeling out of place in their shabby clothes, “and I needed his attention. He’s such a bore sometimes, really. Won’t play nice unless his interest is piqued. Sorry about the collateral damage, Margot. You understand.”

It had been an awful night. Watching Margot feign disinterest even as she seethed and raged beneath her calm demeanour. She and Mason had never been close, but Margot honoured the connection of family. It had been what held their group together for so long when other Unnaturals would have disbanded.

And then, of course, Lecter.

Hannibal Lecter.

Their first meeting had been, perhaps, the most true terror he had experienced in his life. Even more so than when he had encountered the creature that had changed *him. Finding out that monsters were real seemed small potatoes in comparison to knowing that monsters like Lecter walked the earth among them. When Lecter had deigned to help their cause it had seemed more like a whim than anything for the man. He was utterly inscrutable, maroon eyes seeing straight though him.*

Chilton had watched, fascinated by the horror, as Lecter had performed the ritualistic surgery on Miriam Lass without anaesthetic. The woman hadn't flinched even once. Just smiled up at Lecter as he spoke to her continuously, scalpel cutting clean and true, stitchwork immaculate. Even as he burned the symbols into her skin, she smiled beatifically up at the monster preparing her for slaughter as if he were an angel from heaven.

Chilton had never wanted the ritual more than in that moment. He had never wanted to be human again more *than as he watched what true Unnaturals were capable of. Creatures like Lecter shouldn't be allowed to exist and, by extension, neither should creatures like himself.*

"Did you leave the arm in the right place?" Margot was pacing now, marking out the area where she would use her skill to keep them safe until the ritual was done.

"Yes. Somewhere she frequented. The FBI removed it, but I think it was there long enough," Stammets was saying as he fidgeted by a large pile of boxes beneath a tarp.

"Good," Margot's voice was wavering slightly, even as her eyes moved swiftly around the large space, as if sectioning, slicing, again and again; *turning the open space into a maze. Working her magic, casting the illusion like a net across the arena that would become the ritual space.*

Chilton knelt down to check the woman's bonds once again, just for something to do. The one around her body to keep her upper arms against her torso was still taught, and her feet hadn't come loose. When he looked up he found Eva and Stammets watching, Buddish crossed legged on the floor not far away. They all stared, as if amazed that this was happening at all. Amazed that the end of their journey had crept up on them so uneventfully. After such a long time, after so much torture, after death and terror and blood and hatred and self-loathing; it seemed like an anti-climax of sorts.

"She's secure," Chilton said, for lack of anything better to report; when Miriam's eyes jumped to his, Chilton blanched. It was difficult, but he forced a smile and placed a hand on her shoulder. The woman's clothes were damp and she was shivering, "everything's fine," he said.

And he could feel her heartbeat slow, her eyes droop from their terror, her body sag against the ground. He felt ill at the thought of what he was doing, but...

It was necessary.

"Alright," Margot had stated, looking around at them all as if this were a dream she thought she might wake up from at any moment, "it's time."

The setting was all the more disturbing for the contrast. It had been a short drive, fifteen minutes or so, until they found the road lit with silent sirens flashing and police barricades. As they pulled up, Will let out a derisive snort and shook his head, eyes dark.

“A kids playground? Really?” he muttered.

“You don’t approve?” Lecter said from the driver’s seat as he pulled up the handbrake and turned off the engine.

“It’s...tacky.”

“Yes. I suppose you’re right.”

“Hannah, can I ask a favour?” Will said, unable to keep his voice from falling into a monotone.

“You mean you want me to stay here,” she said; when he turned in his seat she was staring out the window, fingers at her chin. Part of him wanted nothing more than to ask her to take him home, take him away, back to New Orleans, tell her she should have never let him leave in the first place. Will rubbed at his face and shook his head. *Such a child* , he chastised himself.

“Yeah. No civilians. Sorry.”

“No you’re not,” she smiled, eyes creasing, “but that’s ok.”

“Right,” Will sighed, eyes downcast, “thanks. We won’t be long.”

Lecter came without an invitation, which Will appreciated. The man was good at knowing when he was wanted and when he wasn’t, and right now Will didn’t think he could bear to be alone. They walked together towards the cavalcade of black SUVs. It wasn’t difficult to notice, *that he was purposefully walking as close to the man as possible without touching* , but Lecter didn’t bring it up. It was comforting, at least. Having the man close by, it almost felt as if they were *walking together through the forest* ...instead of together by a murder site. He could imagine it, and it helped keep him calm.

The boughs swaying above them, creaking gently in the wind.

They ducked under the crime scene tape and approached the gaggle of people surrounding the corpse. Will, drained and exhausted, steeled himself. The investigation of the body was always the most taxing part, but he didn’t exactly have a choice. *Your job, after all* , he tried to reason with himself, *so get it done.*

It was as the coroners moved out of the way that his body stopped mid step.

Eyes widening in shock.

Every fibre of his body tensing into a sort of paralysis, stiff, unmovable.

The very air stilling his breath and his mouth opened to exclaim but suddenly...

“ **Quiet** .”

The word sank into his ear like oil, coiling around his brain even as his nerves resisted, trying to pull free. The shout that had built in his lungs seemed to squirm around inside him, an animal trapped in a cage. He felt sick. By his ear he could feel the warm breath from Lecter’s lips. It took stamina, *the pull to obey was tempting, like comfort, like desire* . It wasn't simple to shake free of the command. Still...he swallowed the sound and took three quick breaths before closing his eyes. *Everything was still the same on opening them.* Turning his head to the right he found maroon eyes

staring at the body before them. *Shock* . That was what he saw in Lecter's eyes. *Shock, shot through with terrible, terrible anger.*

And then it was gone. They were left, staring down at the figure Will had only seen in visions, in dreams, in nightmares. *The long, thin claws at the hands. The ebony-black skin stretched taught over the humanoid form, wrapped as it seemed in long roots extending from its back. Tall legs ending in hoofed feet. And at the head, antler-like protrusions.* The creature he had seen at Melinda's, at Jessica's, *it was here.* Swallowing was difficult, but he managed to get some saliva down to slick the way for his words.

"You see it too, don't you," was all Will could think to whisper.

Blinking, Lecter appeared to shake off his consternation and nod. When their eyes met Will thought he could still sense the surprise Lecter was trying his best not to show.

"I do," Hannibal's voice was soft once more, no longer the commanding tone his voice was capable of, "but I think that perhaps we should not be open about that fact."

"Oh yeah?" Will said, voice wavering, mind racing.

"Since it appears no one else is quite as up to speed as we are."

"Right," Will nodded blankly, voice breathy as he watched everyone before them moving around as if everything were utterly normal, fully unaware of what they were processing; taking a moment he tried to fathom the truth of it, what it meant. *Nothing but darkness stared back at him.*

When he looked to Jack, he found the man solemn and unfazed by Will's distress.

"Yeah, I recognise her too," Jack said, making Will flinch, "it's the Amanuensis from the Registry. Dr. Unger. Better call this in to HQ, Registry will want jurisdiction passed over ASAP."

"What..?" Will breathed out, but the word was lost when the team began talking, Jack walking away on his phone, gait stiff. Will found it difficult to keep his thoughts straight, *pulled from his reverie.* The *thing* on the ground, Will stared at her face, black skin stretched taught. If he tried, really hard, he could see it. Just. The resemblance.

Holy shit , he thought to himself numbly.

"We have a female in her late forties, early fifties. Cause of death is so far undetermined," the coroner was saying while his assistant made the body-bag ready.

"Undetermined? She's opened up like an autopsy, Greg," Beverly was saying as she searched for fibres.

"Correct," the coroner said, "but post-mortem."

"No wonder she was unavailable when I tried to contact her," Zeller muttered, tilting his head to look at her face, "So she was already dead?"

"No bleeding from the cuts to her derma or organs," the coroner shrugged, "So no blood was pumping when she was dissected. I'd say, from the internal temperature, she was alive until maybe only a couple of hours ago. Though it's difficult to say with the exposure to the elements. I'll be

able to work up a more accurate time of death once I've got her back to the lab. I *can* tell you that she'd missing her heart."

"Just the heart?" Brian asked as he took samples.

"Again," the coroner said, seeming unhappy to have to keep repeating himself, "once I get the autopsy done, I can answer your questions. Till then, it's all conjecture."

"Alright," Jack said, reappearing as he put his phone back in his pocket, "thanks Greg. Could you give us a minute? I'll let your crew know when we're ready to have the body removed. Will?"

He almost missed it, his name being called. Blinking, he looked at Jack and wasn't sure how much he was able to hide. Crawford seemed to assess him, but then move on without a word.

"I need you to work the scene. We're on a time limit here."

"No."

Considering that they were clustered around a corpse, talking intimate details about the removal of its organs, it was the one word from Will's lips that seemed to put everyone on edge.

"No," Jack repeated, pursing his lips, eyes hard, "you sure you dont want to rethink that?"

"Pretty sure," Will said, fixing him with a stare, "I don't have the energy," it was a good enough lie, and better for him than the truth, "So unless you want to be calling an ambulance to go with the meat-wagon, we're just going to have stick with what we've got."

Jack rubbed at his mouth with his hand. *He wasn't happy, but he wasn't going to push it either* . That was all Will could get from the man. Behind him, he felt Lecter was still close by. Will leaned back and was glad when the man simply stood stalwartly, effectively holding him up. No one seemed to want to comment on the strange dynamic between the three, Jack and Will and Lecter, *all points on a triangle that could never fully converge* .

"But," Will said, just as Jack seemed pent-up enough to consider arguing, "I can tell you one thing for free," Jack looked at him, unamused and impatient, "this isn't the same killer."

" *What?* " Jack said, disbelieving.

"It's not a display," Will said, definitively, eyes cold, "she was..." he swallowed, finding it difficult to see the thing before him as the woman they were all describing, "...just dumped here. There's no finesse, no attempt to misdirect us, no fake symbols, no *nothing.* The removal of the entire cavity of the torso, all the major organs, is the main link between all of these killings, right back from the start. That it's missing here is more than significant, it's proof that this wasn't done by the same person. Or people. Whichever," Will rubbed at the bridge of his nose and sighed.

"How so?" Jack asked.

"You're not dumb, Jack," Will said numbly.

"Yeah? Well, treat me like I am for a minute," Jack said.

It was almost, *almost* like an apology. If he squinted really hard. For a moment, Will thought he caught a secondary meaning, fliting about inside the man's tone. But when he looked up, Jack

wasn't watching him, and the man's mind was a bland mess of inconsequential daily activities. Rolling his shoulders to try and ease the ache, Will cleared his throat and tried not to always think the worst of people.

"Just the heart," he said, pointing; as his hand wavered above the body he could feel the strange sense of decay, the sort of energy that only ever came from an Unnatural as it degraded. It was unpleasant. He wanted to retract his hand but didn't, "that's all they took."

"Maybe they weren't finished, got interrupted?" Zeller suggested as he continued to photograph.

"Except whoever did this would have had to bypass the lungs just to get where they wanted to go," Will said, staring down at the open cavity, "If they still wanted everything they would have taken the lungs first. Instead," Will said, leaning in, feeling a sickening sense of dread clawing at him as he put his hand closer to *the thing* , "...it replaced the lungs afterwards, so much so that you almost can't tell they were moved at all. It wasn't interrupted. And this isn't the same MO."

"You think we have a *copycat?"* Jack said, sending him a stare, "You're serious."

"I don't know. I just think there are similarities and then there are differences. Like you say, it could have been the same person or people that have been perpetrating the other crimes but...something about this is odd. Something...surgical. The others were butchered for everything they could take. This is," Will let out his breath in a puff, "...this is done with care and attention. Done with respect."

"For her?" Jack asked, uneasy.

"No," Will said, "with respect for their own craft."

Silence followed. Will muttered out over his shoulder, " *help me back to the car?"* and Lecter obliged without question. Jack watched them go, even as he urged his team to work fast. Will watched from the car as the Registry arrived a mere fifteen minutes later, men and women in blue hazard suits pouring out of a long truck with a refrigerated compartment. Watched as the FBI broke before them, like little creatures running from a wave.

The corpse was the first thing to go; zipped up in morgue sack and loaded into the back of the refrigerated truck without so much as a by your leave. Slowly, the crime scene analysts were pushed back and all of their findings were confiscated. Will stared, feeling powerless, as he watched the Registry strip them completely and utterly of the deceased woman's existence.

It was difficult to believe what he was hearing. Somewhere in his mind, Chilton was sure he had misheard.

"Check again," he said tightly into the phone.

"I don't need to check again, Eva was able to get near to the scene, she *saw* it. Had to leave when the Registry showed up," Budge said, sounding worked up, "she's dead. Okay? *Dead* ."

"Fuck," Chilton said, spraying spittle in his fury, "this is madness. How can an Amanuensis *die,* they're protected. How did she even get out of the fucking building!"

"I don't know, but it's a coincidence I don't like," Budge said, voice tight, "you hear me?"

“I do. I hear you.”

“Be careful. I'll be there as soon as I can.”

Hanging up, Chilton swallowed tightly and tried to stay calm. They were running out of time. Somewhere, someone had betrayed them. Had figured out that the Aman was their point of contact. Had taken her out. Only it couldn’t have been the Registry, he surmised as he picked at a loose thread on his suit jacket, or the murder and disposal of the corpse would never have been publicised the way it was. Never thrown out onto the street where anyone could have seen it.

Which only left one of two people responsible, both of which he had been caught between before...

“Sorry I’m late, sweetie,” came the usual drawl.

Walking into the abandoned warehouse, well lit but echoing, was one person dragging another, *one of which he desperately wanted to see, and the other he would happily never see again* . Bedelia looked exquisitely attired, as always, which was only highlighted by the bizarrely clothed teenager she was dragging along beside her by the arm.

“Abigail,” Chilton said with a smile, “my dear. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Alright, Fred,” Bedelia said, rolling her eyes, “it’s uncouth to play with your food, you know.”

“Come, come,” Chilton said, watching the two warily; he lifted his hands and beckoned Abigail closer. She looked strange, hair long and lank, clothes cheap and ill-fitting, but eyes clear and body ready to fight. *He was impressed,* “let me take a look at you.”

When the girl hesitated, Bedelia took her by the shoulder and shoved her forwards. Abigail took a sharp breath and stumbled a few steps, regaining her balance only to wrap her arms around herself, eyes wide. Walking forwards to broach the few feet between them, Chilton smiled. When he rested his hands on her shoulders she looked up with a start, watching him like a hawk.

Just as he opened his mouth, she beat him to the punch.

She mumbled something before shaking her head, bouncing on her feet. Frowning, Chilton looked at her, listening closer.

“Have a...message,” she said a little louder, staring at him pleadingly.

“For me?” he frowned, feeling his heart stammer; *something was wrong,* “well, you’d better tell me then.”

A dainty hand lifted, finger crooked to beckon him closer. Bedelia was watching them with a frown, adjusting her hair. Chilton hesitated, before leaning in, putting his ear close by her mouth. The whisper barely existed, making him strain all the harder to hear it .

“Doctor Du Maruier, she killed the Amanuensis. I saw her. She betrayed us.”

The words burned like fire. Chilton used Abigail to hide his reaction, before steeling his face and leaning back, smile firmly in place once more. Abigail looked terrified, but unwilling to fight back.

“Well, my dear,” he said with an eyes-closed-smile, *enough to keep the rage hidden* , “what,” he opened his eyes and levelled them at Bedelia, “a,” as he raised his hand, signalling for those in

hiding to make themselves known, “conundrum.”

Buddish stood cleanly by the doorway, long dagger in his tight hand. Stammets walked up behind Chilton, eyes scared but stalwart in his stance. And Ingram...

...walked straight to Du Maurier's side, rolling up his sleeves as he did so.

"You," Chilton sneered as the glib Ingram simply shrugged, "you were leaking information to her. I should have fucking known it!"

"Yeah, you really should have," Ingram said as Bedelia smiled smugly, "but then that's always been one of your biggest flaws, hasn't it Fred? Short sightedness."

All they had on their side was the element of surprise. It was all they had. Chilton felt his fingers curling into Abigail Hobbs' loose shirt as he held her close, feeling the girl shivering with fear.

He knew what he had done. *Pulling the pin from the grenade. Knowing, now, that it was only a matter of time.*

Seeing the fury in Bedelia's eyes as the claws came out. *Seeing them in his memory, Mason torn in twain, Margot’s tortured corpse.*

All that was left was to fight or die.

All that was left was revenge or regret .

Chaos. Awful, terrible, horrifying and god damned unexpected. Screaming, she wouldn’t stop screaming .

It was supposed to be simple. That’s what they’d been told. It was supposed to be simple . *But this, it was enough to rend at his soul.*

“Hold her down!” Chilton was shouting as he grabbed at Lass’s legs, kicking and waving, “someone help Margot, someone help her!”

It had started as any other had. Any of the other rituals their group had performed, be it finding rituals, or bonding rituals, or rituals to bless the meat, they had been quick and easy and, over the years, he’d become inured to the gore involved. The smell of blood and the taste of flesh. He would never accept it, that he was a predator, someone adults told stories about to scare little children in their beds, *but he could tolerate it. So this ritual had been the same, rules and timings to follow, words to say. It was all the same.*

Until suddenly it wasn’t.

Margot had been leading the procession. They had descended into the bowels of the warehouse, deep into an illusion spun of Margot’s own making. A hole for them to perform within. A little pocket of space where they couldn’t be caught out by humans snooping. Only another Unnatural would be able to find their way down to them, and it was so unlikely that none of them had even thought of locking the door, so to speak.

And they had spoken the words and drawn the symbols onto the floor as per their instructions. It was all going as normal. When it reached its peak Margot walked to the head of the woman on the

slab, Miriam Lass with her eyes pale and unseeing, and she had touched her head with one word:

“ ***Mummu.”***

The screaming had started almost instantly. Margot had collapsed like a ragdoll, dropping the book in her hands to the floor, her limbs contorting at disgusting angles, eyes wide, mouth agape. And there, at the same time, the once passive Lass had mirrored the action, her limp body suddenly springing to life, arms flailing and mouth prised open against her sewn-shut lips to scream in a sound Chilton wished he would never, ever hear again.

“Hold her down, for fuck’s sake!” he had cried, panicking, heart beating a mile a minute, “stop the ritual! Put out the..!”

When the lights went out the screaming stopped. Like a switch had been flicked. *All that was left in the darkness was the panting and the sobbing of the others, Eva and Buddish and Stammets. Shaking, Chilton stood up awkwardly, feeling around at the now still body beneath his hands. Lass felt cold and damp. Swallowing hard, he tried to ignore that his hands were shaking.*

“Light,” he said, voice barely there, “someone get some light!” he called out.

When he saw her, he almost wished he’d stayed in the dark. Margot’s face was a stretched mask of pain, contorting her pretty features into something else. Something foul. When Chilton dropped to his knees and touched her he felt cold.

“Oh my god,” Eva was weeping, “is she ok?”

“She’s dead,” Chilton said blankly.

“Fucking...what the hell is going on here!” Buddish shouted, “We followed everything to the letter!”

“Let me see,” Stammets knelt down beside him to check the corpse with the flashlight, face pained as he struggled to close Margot’s eyes, “this is...this can’t be. I don’t understand...”

When the sound came, it wasn’t what he’d expected. He thought maybe pain, or anger, or fear; but it was laughter. Lass...she was laughing. Slowly, cautiously, he and Stammets stood. The darkness shook as he took the flashlight from Stammets’ rigid hand. Breath coming slow and steady, Chilton steeled himself as he swung the flashlight up in one swift motion.

He jolted back in fear at the sight, covering his mouth to halt the cry from escaping.

She was there, sitting up, legs dangling over the edge as her pale skin shone in the light, body seeming to decay before their eyes, the thread sewing her mouth shut strained and bled as she pulled apart her lips and laughed. Miriam Lass stared at them all with eyes beyond understanding, twin irises fighting for dominion, the hideous laugh switching between hysteria and sobbing terror.

“ ***Kill me.*** *”*

“...out of your *mind* ? That was way, way out of line!”

“Could you keep your *voice down* .”

The sounds echoed through the long corridor like testaments. Will continued to walk forwards despite it only bringing the raised voices closer and clearer. Beside him, Hannibal was checking his phone, tongue wetting his lower lip in concentration. They had returned to Quantico at Will's request, after dropping Hannah at her hotel. So far, Hannibal hadn't questioned the quarrel he'd had with his Matron, and Will was glad for that at least. He didn't think he'd have the energy.

When things became quiet, when he was given a moment to think, all he could see what *the thing, black skin stretched taught,* as if it had walked right out of his mind and into reality. Part of him wanted to know, so desperately needed to know, while the other was certain it would rather remain in the dark.

"Are we going inside?" Lecter asked as he put his phone away, eyes curious.

"I don't know," Will said, listening to the sounds of the heated argument still in progress.

"Trouble in paradise?" there was a hint of amusement in Lecter's voice as they drew closer.

"Has there ever not been?" Will said sardonically, "You've read Milton, right?"

A genuine laugh, and those maroon eyes alighted on him appreciatively, "You always see the light side of a dark moment, don't you Will."

"Not always," Will shrugged, swallowing, *hating that he couldn't control the spike in his heartrate or the sweat at his palms as those eyes watched him appreciatively* , "just when things get really dire."

"Well, then I suppose this would be the best time for it."

"Could you..?" Will took a breath and tried to think of something innocuous.

"Get you a..." Hannibal pointed at the sign for the cafeteria that indicated it was downstairs, "shall we say a cup of coffee?"

"Yeah," Will nodded, taking the man's offer even though he knew they were both just feeding into the deception, "thanks."

Will stopped, rubbing under his nose before shoving his hands in his pockets. It was still cold here. He wondered, as he took a deep breath and puffed it out, if they just didn't have the heating on or if he really was getting ill.

Two sets of eyes sprang to him as he entered, letting the door fall shut behind him. Beverly looked stern, not exactly angry; more determined than anything else. As if she had made up her mind. Will watched as she picked up her jacket and left by the back door that led to the copy-room. As Will approached Zeller he heard a further door slam shut. Brian sat down on one of the long, chipped wooden desks and looked him right in the eye.

"You ok?" were the first words out of Zeller's mouth; Will blanked, unused to such bald courtesy.

"Uh, yeah," Will nodded, "I'm fine," he paused, eyes flitting around uncertainly.

"I'm sorry I didn't answer, earlier I mean. I was at the Archives helping Price. No fucking reception in that place."

There was a pause that only bred awkwardness. Finally, Will glanced up, mouth open, “What exactly did..?”

“She told me, Bev. Everything. And I told *her* ,” Brian said, seeming to realise he was being loud and bringing his voice down to level, “I told her she was fucking crazy. Did she really pull her gun?”

“To be fair,” Will said bluntly, “I don’t blame her.”

“We’re fucking *partners* , she has no right!” Brian said, furious, “Hell, all the times she tells me to be more tolerant?”

“Really, I don’t blame her. I don’t. I think...it must have seemed really nuts.”

Will squirmed under the focus of blue eyes, watching him in amazement, “Wow, so you really..?” Zeller looked like he was trying to picture it, using his hands to gesture, fingers spinning as he pointed them up in the air as if to replicate *the rocks and stones and trees*.

“Yeah, I really,” Will copied the gesture, eyes heavily sardonic.

“Shit. Well,” Brian seemed to lose the ability to think of polite things to say, “sorry I missed it. Sounds rad.”

It was impossible to stop the puffing laugh Will let loose, smiling, rubbing at the back of his neck. The seriousness of the situation slammed directly into the confusion of acceptance; *an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object* . Will decided to stop ploughing ahead and always assume the worst.

“ *Rad?* What are you, twelve?” Will asked, brow raised.

“Child of the eighties,” Zeller shrugged, grinning; however, it didn’t take long for it to disappear from the man’s face, replaced by a sombre visage, “is it true?”

“What?” Will asked, feeling stupid.

“Miriam Lass. Is it true?”

Will bit at the inside of his lip and balled his hands into fists in his pockets, scrunching at the fabric tightly. Taking a deep breath didn’t do anything to help, but the effort at least seemed to give him the ability to be objective. *Tasted of old furniture and carpet cleaner.*

“Yeah. It’s true.”

“Fuck,” Zeller said, eyes clouded by anger, “ *fuck* . I don’t believe...I mean it’s insane. You were right. All this time, you were right.”

“I was?” Will asked, frowning.

“About Jack,” Zeller was speaking quietly now.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Will tried to ignore the itch against his skin, lifting both palms and scrubbing them across his face. He let out a frustrated sound and shook his head.

“I feel like I can’t be sure about anything anymore,” he said blankly, staring at the cream-coloured wall across the room, holding cork boards loaded with pictures, maps, evidence, theories. For a moment it all seemed so trite, as their team pulled itself apart.

“Will,” Zeller saying his name pulled his gaze back to the man; he looked so sincere it made Will wince to think of the futility of it, “we’ll figure this out. After this case, we can bring all the evidence we have to the Inspector General and...”

Shaking his head, Will’s face twitched, “It’s Registry. Definitely, one hundred percent their doing. Even you understand, right? There’s nothing we can do against something like that.”

“But it’s..!”

“Tried this before. Been down that road,” Will said tiredly, “all that’s at the end is...” Will searched for the word, staring at Brian intensely, “scrutiny.”

Brian swallowed, hand on his hip, shaking his head angrily. Not even humans liked to envisage a scenario where the Registry was interested in you. No one wanted to be the lab rat, running on the wheel for the scientist’s amusement.

“Think about your sister, Brian,” Will said softly, feet shuffling on the ground, “before you do anything rash.”

“This is horseshit,” Zeller was saying, eyes seeming miles away, *sad and uncertain* .

“Tell me about it,” Will said, latching his hands behind his head and pulling, stretching across his shoulders, “but thanks.”

“For what?” Brian asked as Will pulled out a chair and sat down.

“Giving a crap,” Will said bluntly.

“Ha,” Brian raised his brows and puffed out his cheeks, letting the breath out like a popped balloon, “yeah. Who would have thought it.”

He waited a few beats, checking the room once, listening for the sound of feet in the corridor. Zeller was watching his odd behaviour. Will leaned towards him, speaking quietly, “There is something you could do for me.”

“Ok,” Zeller said, looking interested.

“I have something I need Jimmy to see. Off the record, so best it doesn’t come from me.”

Zeller’s eyes were drawn inexorably down to the phone Will had pulled from his jacket, shining a blurry photograph in Will’s cupped hand. There was a pause, then a nod, and Brian brought out his own device and snapped three quick shots of the photograph.

“Sure thing,” he muttered quietly, “I’ll get you the results later on.”

“Thanks,” Will said, smile barely there, *but still there, despite everything* , “really. I mean it.”

“Shit, well if I’m going to go in I gotta go all in, right?” Zeller said, scratching the back of his neck.

When the door opened, Will expected to see Lecter standing there with a useless cup of coffee no one would end up drinking. Instead, he found the last person he wanted to be in a room with. Jack Crawford walked in with the air of a condemned man that refused to believe the guillotine was real; all painful bravado. Next to him, Will could see Brian watching their boss carefully.

“Zeller,” Jack said, "they need you in processing.”

“I just came from there,” Zeller said, frowning.

“I think he means he wants to chew me out in private,” Will said, giving Brian a significant look; Zeller bit at his lower lip and raised his brows sharply up and down.

“Right,” Brian said, getting up off the table and looking between Will and Jack significantly, “I’ll be outside.”

Waiting for the door to close was like waiting for someone to throw the switch. Jack stood, refusing to sit. Will wished he would. Looming wasn’t something he enjoyed. When he spoke, Will hadn’t expected the question.

“So, how long has this thing between you and Lecter been going on?” Jack asked, out-of-the-blue.

Will stiffened. Hearing it said out loud it seemed both comical, terrible and enough to make his blood stutter. Turning, Will sniffed and stared at him, forcing a look of utter apathy. He considered lying, but thought better of it, “Not really a...thing,” Will shrugged, “uh. A week I guess.”

Thinning his lips to a line, Jack purposefully glared, “Are you seriously having relations with this one too?”

“Trying to inform me that I have a thing for shrinks? I already figured that out.”

“Look,” Jack got close, uncomfortably so, but Will bore it, “when this shit happened between you and Alana, we looked the other way because...”

“Because you felt guilty,” Will finished for him.

“ *Because* I didn’t want you back in that fucking asylum. But I’m not doing that again, not this time.”

“Uh huh,” Will said, elongating the words, “and why should you give a shit who I’m sleeping with?”

“This investigation is under enough scrutiny as it is,” Jack said stoutly, “without claims of abuse. *I* assigned him to your care. *I’ll* be the one liable if it comes out he was using his position to solicit sex.”

The laugh came, unbidden. There were so many things wrong with the assessment, and yet so many things that could also have proven Jack right. The feeling was still there, and that one word, **‘quiet’** *, coiling around inside his head like a warm, silken embrace* . But it hadn’t stuck, hadn’t sunk its claws in and steered him where it wanted. In the end, it was his choice to keep his mouth shut. And Will would stand by that.

Giving Jack an entertained glance, “What? You think he psychiatrically sweettalked his dick into my mouth, that it?” he said, unimpressed but amused.

“ *Jesus,* Will,” Jack muttered, turning away from him, disgusted, “don’t need to hear about your exploits.”

“No? Then why’d you fucking bring it up?”

“I’m not going to hang because you can’t keep your hands to yourself!”

“Yeah, well I don’t give a shit what you think,” Will said, eyes bright as he threw his hands in the air, “I literally don’t give a fuck! And you, *you*.. !” he seethed, noting Jack's reaction as he twitched, *afraid*, “have a fucking nerve. A fucking hard goddamn neck.”

“You want your cake and eat it, huh?” Jack looked livid, and yet there was a pale set to his face that showed the guilt that lived beneath the skin.

“Yeah,” Will said baldly, glaring at him, “I want the cake. I want the champagne. *I want an eight course fucking meal !* And you know why?” he asked, pointing at his chest, “Because I fucking *deserve* it. I do. And you owe me.”

“Don’t make this...”

“You *owe* me,” Will said, overenunciating each word.

When the door opened a second time, it was to reveal Hannibal Lecter holding the useless cup of coffee that no one would drink. He walked into the room, now inhabited only by Will Graham seated at the centre of the solitary box. Sitting down beside Will, he placed the coffee down on the table. The little bubble that existed around them, shimmering, fragile, it was faint but Will could feel it. *Lecter’s presence seemed almost palpable . Soothing.*

“I’d like to go home,” Will said softly, watching the dust motes float in the air.

“Is it wise to..?”

“Please. I just want to rest for a little while.”

“I understand,” Hannibal nodded, “allow me to accompany you.”

“Glad I didn’t have to ask,” Will smiled grimly.

"You were right,” she smiled, “it was delicious.”

“Desert?”

“You read my mind.”

The coconut and mango pudding was divine, lychees in their spiky skin decorating the sides. They managed to have a laugh getting them out of their shells and off of the slippery, dark stones at their centres. Alana chewed on the perfumed fruit and listened to Ji-min talking about his latest music craze.

“You’re actually learning to play then?” she asked as the waiter brought Ji-min an iced coffee, “Last time you said you were going to learn the piano, and I’m pretty sure you used it as more of a

sideboard than an instrument."

"Ha, yeah," he grinned sheepishly, "I sold it. Eventually. Car needed a lot of work, so it paid for that. Still, this time, guitar. I'm serious."

"Sure," she said with a smile, popping another fruit in her mouth and wiping her fingers on a napkin.

They sat in silence for a few moments, *sipping and chewing* , before they finally locked eyes again. Alana stalled as Ji-min laughed a little, mouth closed.

"So. How much longer we going to pretend you really want to hear about my sad attempts at a hobby?"

"I don't..."

" *Alana* ," he said, shaking his head, "you really think I worked with you for a year and didn't pick up any tricks and tips? I get it, it's fine. There's something you really need to know. Don't have to butter me up," he put down his coffee and sighed, "although a date would have been nice."

"...I'm sorry," she said, looking down at the empty bowl smeared with melting yellow cream, "it was a really nice meal."

They shared the bill. Alana pulled her coat closed tight as they left together and walked back towards their cars, parked on the street. Once they reached Alana's car, Ji-min looked around them subtly.

"Can I join you?"

She paused for a heartbeat, unsure, but his eyes were clear and serious. She nodded, "sure."

Getting in the driver's seat, she waited until he climbed in the passenger side. As she made to turn on the light he stopped her. Alana took a breath before retracting her hand. When Ji-min spoke, his voice was professional, just like she rembered it had been during briefings. Something he used to cope, she had always guessed, with all the horror they had to deal with.

"I spoke to Captain Hawkins. About your case."

"Did he give you anything?"

"Nothing concrete. Nothing that could get any of us into trouble. So no hard copies, no evidence. But...as soon as I asked him about the report number he went a bit...odd. It was a suspected kidnapping that later was retracted when the victim showed up and denied that she'd been under duress to leave or detained in any way."

"Well, that doesn't sound very notable," Alana said, brow raised.

"It isn't. Only, well, it doesn't exactly end there," Ji-min sighed.

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said, he god real odd about it. Asked me why I wanted to know about that case in particular, and I said it was about cold-cases linked to current cases involving ritual homicides. He said...he

was the responding officer," Ji-min said heavily, his face set.

"Responding to what?"

"Same woman, from your report, same victim. There was another incident. Nineteen-Seventy-Seven, he said it was about eleven at night as far as he could remember. Summer, but it was dark. Hot."

"He remembers all that from back then?"

"It was...he said, and I quote," he rubbed at his eye and looked uncomfortable, " *if I could scrub the memory of that night from my mind forever, believe me I would* ."

"Oh," Alana said, for lack of anything better.

They sat in awkward silence; part of her wanted to tell him to stop, but she'd come too far now.

"...So," he continued after a moment, "it was late. They'd had a call of a disturbance out at the local commune."

"A what?"

"Witch coven," he clarified, "They call them communes down south. He said that the dispatcher told him and his partner that an anonymous caller had phoned in about hearing a scream and something like a fight. They called it a possible 10-31 but Hawkins told me they got calls about the commune all the time. People trying to make trouble for the Practicioners, you know. So, they weren't expecting anything at all, other than to deal with a bunch of pissed off witches for waking them up so late over a prank call.

"Except, and let me tell you Hawkins isn't a superstitious man. Salt of the earth type," Ji-min said, staring ahead as the first drops of rain began spattering against the windshield, "but even he said that when he stepped up to knock at that house...he felt the hairs raise on the back of his neck. Didn't want to go inside. He told me his partner had looked in through the window, seen feet on the floor sticking out of a doorway. Had to practically slap the sense back into Hawkins to get him to help break in."

"What about the others in the commune?" Alana asked, "Didn't they..?"

"That's just it. Place was empty. Twelve houses, all left as if they'd just up and abandoned the place. Only the thirteenth house was, well, occupied is the wrong word I suppose. She was..." Ji-min looked tired, as if just hearing the story had taken it out of him, and telling it was taking everything he'd had left; she felt guilty, knowing now why he'd tried to draw out their evening. If it was her, she wouldn't have wanted to talk about this either, "Hakwins said he'd never seen anything like it. She was...torn apart. Found her in the bathroom, next to a half full bathtub filled with blood and mucus. It was up the walls, pieces of her everywhere. It was a mess. Said they had to stay there till back-up showed up. Longest ten minutes of his life."

"Jesus," Alana said; she felt cold.

"And that wasn't the worst part. When the medical examiner looked her over, he said the victim had..." he rubbed his hands together and sighed, "not long given birth. They thought maybe she was attempting a water birth before she was attacked, that maybe that was what the bath was for."

“She’d had a child?” Alana asked, shocked.

“Yeah. Only they never found it. Poor fucking thing. The investigation concluded that the best possibility for what happened was maybe a rite gone wrong. The whole commune had disappeared, they couldn’t trace any of them. So, they took the blame. The town mourned, and then moved on. Things that vicious tend to get swept under the rug, you know? People don’t want to think about them.”

“Yeah,” Alana nodded blankly; *don't ask,* she thought suddenly, even as her mouth moved on autopilot, *just don't ask,* “So...did you get a name for me?”

“Oh, right, sorry,” Ji-min blinked, as if trying to dispel an imagined image from his mind, “Hawkins said her name was Hannah Graham, twenty nine, she’d lived there all her life...”

He continued talking but Alana didn’t have the ability to listen, staring as the rain began to fall in full, splashing against the car; *the embodiment of grief.* She wished she had never come. She wished she’d never asked.

She wished she’d never known.

“You know what it was, don’t you.”

The car had been quiet as neither spoke. Running his tongue over the inside of his teeth, Will decided to take the initiative. Lecter seemed to pause, flicking on the indicator and turning right at the junction. The window wipers came on automatically as rain started to flit against the glass.

“Meaning you do not,” Lecter replied enigmatically.

“Can we not do this now? Just maybe speak plainly for once?”

“And here I thought that was a fair assessment,” Lecter sent him a patient look, “but yours, I’m afraid, was off the mark. I am not sure I have a name for what we saw."

“Ok,” Will kept his eyes on the man as they drove, “let’s say I believe you, are you telling me in all your research and work with the occult you’ve never once seen anything like that?”

“Not in my research, no, but then I am a psychologist first. Cryptozoology is not exactly my area.”

“Right, fine,” Will sniffed, feeling distinctly pissed off that everyone around him was holding their cards close to their chest.

The words *pot, kettle and black* kept coming to mind. Will could feel the black mood around him like his own personal raincloud. He didn’t even remember closing his eyes.

It was getting dark by the time they pulled up into the driveway, thick clouds obscuring the last of the sunset, the rain still going strong. As the car jerked to a halt and turned off, Will blinked his eyes open. Lecter’s house sat before them like a monolith, dark and barren.

“Was I asleep?” he asked, realising how stupid a question it was as soon as he’d asked it.

“I thought it best not to disturb you,” Hannibal unbuckled his seatbelt and clicked off the overhead light, “sometimes a short rest does the world of wonders,” he said as he opened the door and stepped out.

“Uh huh,” Will said sleepily, following suit.

Closing the door was difficult, but Will would admit that Lecter was right. The nap had done him good, even if his muscles ached he felt a little more alert and aware than before. *Less steamrollered, and more trampled.* He followed Hannibal as they ascended the short stairs to the front door. Looking up and around the façade of the building, Will frowned.

“She didn’t even leave a light on?” he murmured.

“What was that?” Lecter asked as he opened the front door and walked inside.

“Abigail,” Will said, following him in; the house was silent and dark. Will pushed past Lecter and raised his voice, “Abigail?”

No reply. No *nothing* . Will felt the breath catch in his chest. Hannibal said something to him as he rushed inside and up the stairs, but he didn’t hear it. Along the corridor, round the corner, he rushed into the room, “Abby..?”

Cold and empty. His breathing sped up. It took a swallow of fear before he could hurry inside, turning on the bedside lamp.

And there it sat. Will stared at it, *the raven-charm sitting innocuously beneath the lamp, beside her phone* . Proof that he wouldn’t believe until he’d seen it. Rushing to the wardrobe he threw it open, *clothes all still on their hangers, duffel bag missing.* As he ran from the room Lecter appeared; Will ran into him, pushing past.

“What’s wrong?” he was asked.

“It’s Abigail, she’s gone!” Will said, worried; he headed for his room, then Lecter’s, running downstairs to the kitchen, dining room, garden, “Abigail? *Abigail!* ”

Standing on the grass in the gloom, Will Graham gripped his hands together and tried to centre himself.

"Shit, oh *shit* ,” he said to himself through clenched teeth; thinking of the last time he’d seen her face, *all cold resentment,* thinking of the case, *the missing pets* , thinking of his responsibility, *caring for her more than he should.*

The sound of the door behind him made him start. Throwing a glance over his shoulder he found Lecter emerging from the building, face solemn. Will ground his teeth and bounced on his feet, shaking his head.

“She’s gone, isn’t she,” Will said; it wasn’t a question, but Lecter answered it anyway.

“I can see no sign of her,” Hannibal nodded, face pinched, “do you think she..?”

“It’s my fault,” he said, voice catching; he ducked his face down, “all she wanted was to see her mom and I wouldn’t let her. All she wanted was to be safe, and I *ruined it.* ”

“Will, this is not because of you,” Lecter said sternly; walking in front of him, Hannibal took hold of him by the shoulders, waiting until Will looked up at him, “I am as much to blame as you are. I believed she would not run, but she has. We will find her.”

“She left her phone,” Will said, the strict reality of the situation kicking in, “and the charm I made for her. I don’t know where she would go. Jesus, I can’t even call her in as missing because the Registry is looking for her in connection to my case,” Will heard his voice growing hysterical but couldn’t stop, “Fuck, I’m not even supposed to know her!”

“Will, please...”

“I’m sorry,” he shook his head, “shit, I’m *sorry* .”

“I told you before,” Lecter smiled softly, “never apologise to me. Now, I think it best to start at the most obvious places and we move on from there.”

“I...” nodding, Will pushed away the fear threatening to surge up around him, drown him in its dark waters, and locked eyes with the man keeping him steady; *his anchor* , “right. Ok. We need to go, now, I don’t know how much of a head start she has.”

“Agreed.”

The night turned long. Seemed to stretch out forever, dark road rolling beneath tyres. His eyes were fixed on the window, seeing every face that went past as her own. *Sad, pale, but strong and resilient.* Abigail Hobbs deserved better, he knew that for a fact. *Better than you* , he thought derisively, *better than her family.* It was sometimes difficult to stay awake, *he was so very, very tired* , but Lecter did most of the talking, for which he was grateful.

Homeless shelters, flop houses, soup kitchens, anything they could find. No word of a scrawny shifter matching Abigail’s description. Will called the few contacts he had in the circuit, half-breeds who sometimes gave up info for a price, but no dice. By the time he suggested that she might have hitched her way to Alana Bloom’s house, Will knew he was desperate. *One a.m., but it was worth a shot.* When he tried calling, Alana didn’t pick up. They drove out, the dark fields like an abyss falling away all around them.

Time seemed to stretch. *Rain began falling in earnest.*

“Alana?” his knock was pathetic, his voice a little slurred; he reached up to ring the doorbell, but no one answered.

“Her car is missing,” Lecter said stated, standing in the flood of the Bentley’s headlights, the rain visible as it flew into the bright pool of light, “I believe she is not home.”

“... *Fuck* ,” Will closed his eyes and let his head fall against the wet wood of the door.

It had been a mistake to turn so quickly. He felt his hands meet the stone steps before he realised his legs had given out. His head swam as he took deep breath after deep breath. The sound of feet rushing towards him was distorted. By the time Lecter had helped him to his feet, Will had passed out.

Flitting images. Sounds. A memory perhaps. Or a dream. The forest at dusk. Will thought he could hear breathing, the snort of a stag in the brush. He was frightened, but something told him not to

be. Fur beneath his palms. A woman's voice...

" *Will?* "

A hand against his shoulder shaking. Opening his eyes was difficult, heavy. It took a moment to scrub away the sleep, but after a moment he recognised Lecter's face. He looked around, sitting up in the car seat.

"Will?" Lecter said again, "Do you have keys? I can't open your front door."

"We're..." he frowned, taking a long breath as he stared out of the windshield, at familiar setting illuminated in the headlights, "but this is my house."

"Yes, I thought it best to bring you back to Wolf Trap. You are dangerously fatigued. There is magic here that will help. I think you should stay here tonight."

"But Abigail..." he began to argue.

"You will be of no use to her unconscious," Lecter finished the argument before it even began; Will stared up at him, realising the man's hair was wet, falling across his brow, "will you come inside?"

"...Yes," he said softly, nodding; he allowed Lecter to help him up, keep him steady. The rain fell in large drops, he could feel it chill and cold against his scalp as it flattened his hair, soaked through his clothes, his shoes, "and there isn't a key. I just need to..."

A quick symbol drawn against the door with his fingertip and a murmured word, ' *cara* '; the door clicked open. Lecter twisted the handle quietly, Will hanging onto him for support. *He wouldn't deny that he was glad to be back.* Flicking on the lights, he leaned against the wall as he toed off his shoes and shuffled out of his wet jacket, watching carefully as Hannibal took off his heavy overcoat and shook it out on the doormat, hanging it up on the coatrack before untying and removing his shoes, placing them neatly beneath.

"Bedroom?" he asked as he picked up Will's jacket from the floor and placed it next to his own.

"Upstairs," Will said, eyes closed.

"Very good."

It was slow going, but Lecter was patient. Will drew in deep breaths, *the smell of home, lavender by the window, jasmine, dog rose, honeysuckle* . A calming succour drawn deep into the lungs. The stairs were a struggle, enough that Lecter thought it best to carry him. Will was sure that if he'd been more compos mentis he would have made a scene, but as it was he simply savoured the strange feeling of being held, the ground moving beneath him without his feet touching anything at all.

He was placed in the armchair in the corner Will sometimes threw his clothes onto if he was feeling particularly lazy. It was an odd contrast: *the easy familiarity of home mixed with the unfamiliarity of Lecter being in it.* Will watched him move around the room, turning on the lamp and preparing the sheets. At one point he disappeared into the bathroom and Will could hear the tap going, something being filled. When Hannibal reappeared it was with a glass of water which he placed on the nightstand, and a pair of towels which he put onto the bed.

As he approached, Will's senses flared, *though it was difficult to understand why.* The man hunkered down and reached over to undo the buttons on Will's shirt. When Will batted him away, Hannibal merely looked at him, unconcerned.

"I need you to stand, Will, if you can."

"I can get myself to bed, thanks very much," Will muttered, sighing, "just..."

"I think that leaving you alone at this moment would be very foolish."

"There's a spare bedroom across the way, could you just..."

" *Will* ," he swallowed on hearing his name said, so softly, gently, "let me help you."

Closing his eyes didn't help. He tried to undo a button himself but his fingers fumbled, *wet and cold.* Standing was difficult, but necessary. Deciding to keep his eyes closed felt cowardly, and yet perhaps more anxious than if he'd left them open. At the first feel of fingers against his clothes Will started badly, letting out a huff of air. *It was difficult to stop his brain from working, rewriting the day across the bone arena of his skull, a gruesome play acted out again and again.*

In a way the hands became a useful distraction. Whenever Will became focused, obsessed with some detail, some miserable image emblazoned onto the backs of his eyes, the strong hands would lift an arm or slide a belt or pop out a button. The rain pattered against the window, creating a low beat, *white noise* . He thought he might have swayed, stepping out of his wet jeans as they were pulled to the floor, sodden socks taken off one at a time. He barely cared as Lecter helped him out of his underwear; he kicked it away across the floor, clammy skin prickling in the chill.

It was the shirt he clung to, *long sleeved and round necked like always* . The material stuck to his skin uncomfortably, rumpled, but the thought of removing it was more distressing. Opening his eyes, he found Lecter watching him steadily. *He felt hot, feverish* .

"I'll take it off, just..." Will shivered, "can I have the towel, please?"

"I assure you, it will be nothing I have not seen before," Lecter said; Will was sure it was supposed to be reassuring, only it wasn't.

"I don't know about that," he whispered, arms still wrapped fully around his torso.

Lecter approached him like a hunter would a wounded animal, *as if worried they would flee* . His fingers were warm as he placed them against the sensitive flesh at Will's sides, making his muscles jump and quiver. They curled, up and under the damp material of the shirt, thumb spreading softly over the polyester blend as if asking for permission. Will shook his head.

"Let me help," was all Lecter said.

Will drew in a long, stuttering breath, letting it out slowly. It was like a supplication, unwinding his arms from their death grip and slowly above his head. The material was pulled, sticking against his shoulders and elbows, tousling his hair. He knew he was shivering now, as he brought his arms down, trying his best to cover the worst of it. Futile, he knew it was, but even the fruitlessness of the gesture didn't stop the attempt. When Hannibal handed him the towel Will wrapped it around his shoulders quickly. As he stood, mortified, Will felt another towel drop across his head, shifting around beneath hands against his wet hair. Closing his eyes, he leaned into the touch.

“If you thought a few scars were enough to scare me off,” he could hear Lecter say, muffled a little by the towel, “then you underestimate the strength of my character.”

“A few is putting it lightly,” Will said grimly; he kept his mouth shut until Lecter was done, removing the towel from his head. When Will looked up, the man was carefully drying his own hair, before sliding the ruffled strands back into place with practiced ease.

Maroon eyes held him in their stare, *a moth caught in the candle’s flare.* When Lecter reached out to take Will’s hands, currently holding the towel closed tightly, it was strange to feel himself allow it. Allow the man to pry apart his desperate cover. The lamplight threw his skin in a slightly sickly light, shadows only highlighting the raised flesh. White scar tissue crisscrossed and overlapped, lines and curves, some symbols visible, others lost. He looked away, ashamed, down at the patchwork of white lines. Sometimes, when he looked at the tapestry on his chest and arms, he could remember the pain, *carving open his own flesh* . Other times the sensation was lost to him.

When Hannibal touched his skin it was almost scalding. Will hissed in a breath. The man was warm, *always warm* ; in comparison he felt like ice, frozen to the bone.

“What drives such a beautiful creature to desecrate its own flesh?” Lecter asked gently, tracing a long line from pectoral to navel; Will watched in fascination as Lecter began popping the buttons on his own waistcoat, pulling it off, dropping it to the floor.

“I...I had to get her back,” Will said tonelessly, as if it were a good enough explanation; it was mesmerising, watching Lecter’s skin revealed, *smooth, unblemished, hairs dark and shot through with grey,* “Miriam. I had to. But it costs, to do something so...stupid. There’s always a sacrifice.”

“So fragile,” Lecter said, shirt abandoned; he undid his trousers and pushed them down along with his underwear. Will felt the need to look away but couldn‘t, eyes stuck, *fly in the paper,* “and yet so strong. Always giving of yourself, until there is nothing left.”

There, across the front of Hannibal's pelvis was a scar, ragged and branching, like tree roots. Somehow, it was all the more glaring for its singular nature, a jagged blemish when all else was perfection, *a vandalised statue.* It shone dull in the lamplight like an unearthed fossil. And when he reached out it seemed natural to Will to do so, lift up curious fingers and *touch* . The skin was soft, but the muscle beneath was solid. Stepping forwards, Will splayed his hand, pressing his palm against the breach, the bridge, the connection. His pinky finger tangled in the tuft of pubic hair above the man’s flush cock. His throat went dry.

“You know,” Will spoke, knowing it was due to nerves that he even tried to distract them from the path they were on, “Jack thinks we’re having an affair,” looking up at Lecter’s face he felt light-headed, “are we?”

When hands appeared against his face, holding him tenderly as lips pressed against his own, Will accepted it; shaking, feeling numb fingers drop the towel to the ground. His eyes snapped closed, a swift inhale, hands reaching out instinctually to grab at warm flesh, feeling hipbones. When a tongue laved against his lips the moan was involuntary. Opening his mouth he invited Lecter inside, gripping onto him like his life depended on it. He felt his feet move as the taller man steered them to the bed, pushing him down against the covers.

Lips against his neck, canines scraping his flesh. Will thought he could feel every part of him, *where they touched, skin against skin;* a culmination of his desire and his mistrust. He wanted to push away his lust, to instead focus the truth, to know the truth, but it was overridden. The warmth,

burning against his skin was beautiful, terribly beautiful. *Ravishing*. Felt it cover him like a shroud, shielding him from the world.

“What would you have me do?” whispered words against his jawline as strong fingers curved around the line of his buttocks, caressing him as if he were fragile enough to shatter, “What can I give to the man who never takes anything for himself?”

“Please,” Will thought he might be asleep, *that this was all a dream,* only the touch kept it real, made it solid, tangible, “please, just...” Hannibal’s head lifted, looking down at him; Will reached up to touch his face gently, “shut up and kiss me before I fall asleep.”

A laugh, a broad smile. Will revelled in it, felt wrapped up in it, wanted nothing more than to keep it close, for as long as he could. *Keep the wolves at bay, snarling at the door, just one night longer.*

Chapter End Notes

Leathcheann tú, chomh mífhreagrach! - You idiot, so irresponsible!

Sea, b’fhéidir, ach tá mo chúiseanna agam. - Yes, maybe, but I have my reasons.

Mummu [Summerian]– Born (one who is born)

Cara - Friend

Feathers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Like a step down a steep hill, things began to roll, then tumble, then fall. *Momentum* . If he kept his eyes closed, would the ground still hit? A lurching in his stomach, *falling from a high place* . If he held on tight enough, perhaps he could remain here, stay where he was put, stay where he was not wanted. But things had already begun to move, and latches had been opened and the ground was sliding away beneath his feet and...

His hands didn't meet rough stone; instead, the soft bounce of pine needles, leaves and dirt. Fingers prickled with a pain only cold could bring. A deep breath in brought an ache in the lungs, and out with a milky cloud borne of inner heat.

The causeway he walked was high, drifting at either side like mesentery, connecting him to everything. Each thread not a different colour, but a different feeling. He could play them like the violin his hands had known when he was young, plucking the strings to test their pitch.

Except here the pitch was not just to be a specific note. It was to test the scale. Up and down, the strings needed to be in tune. If not, it would never work.

Hannibal was finding it simpler and simpler to be in tune with Will Graham, to find that one string and follow it like a lifeline to shore, a glowing example of his work, of his efforts so far. Not every manipulation worked, and Will had made it most difficult for him. But as the bed that contained them also held the remnants of their passion, he could feel the connection strengthen like steel, solidifying, riveted. Things were coming to a head, a punultimate moment dangling like Damocles' sword. Perhaps, he would think later, it had made him complacent.

Only now, as he stepped from his mind as if he were leaving a train car at a familiar station, did he realise his mistake.

Unfolding slowly, creeping carefully like a cat, the body of Will Graham left the comfort of the body of Hannibal Lecter, laying asleep in the bed. The door opened before him and his feet crept down the stairs silently. Leaving the house, he walked out into the first light of dawn on feet that did not feel the cold. His naked flesh recognised the chill but it was not important, it was not new. This was old ground, only seen through new eyes.

The forest was silent at this hour, silent and crisp. Only Wolf Trap spoke to him, whispered into his ear like a spy. The flutter of wings, the snap of twigs, the falling of snow. *Secrets and trespasses.* The trees stood tall. The bark was cool and smooth beneath his fingers as he moved from birch to birch. First rays of sunshine were tinted orange in the winter air, kissing his skin with the promise of warmth. Lifting his head, he sniffed.

A shot, ringing out through the air like a thunder crack. Tilting his head, he blinked his eyes and listened. *Listened.* Creeping close, walking through the underbrush, the creatures slowly

emerged. ***Snowy rabbits, noses twitching*** **,** ***crows and ravens flitting through the branches above, the clop of hooves, the padding of paws, the panting of breath.*** **Looking around as he hunched, moving from tree to tree to tree, he could see them there; coyotes trailing him, eyes alert, heads bobbing as they trotted, letting out short yelps.**

It didn't take long to find. It never did. ***Trespass*** **.**

Looking up was difficult. Perhaps, he thought as he looked around and tried to recognise his surroundings, you already know you're dreaming. It would have been easier, he supposed, to admit it. Only the pain at his hands and the ache in his lungs and the fatigue in his muscles felt disturbingly real. Will tried to think, *tried to remember,* but it was difficult here. It was difficult to know who he was. He felt subsumed and exhumed, as if stuck behind glass while another showed their mind on a movie reel.

Getting to his knees was rough, forcing him to use a nearby tree to haul himself to his feet. The bark was brittle, snapping. It seemed to echo around the frozen forest, the sound warping. Looking up at the sky, he blinked his eyes and wiped at his nose as it dripped.

"Skynde sig! Skynd dig, de fanger os!"

The voice rattled through the trees like a beater down a xylophone. He thought, maybe, did he see it? A strip of red, floating on the air. It was difficult, lies, it was torture, to follow but something compelled him. He had to hurry, he had to run, he had to reach them!

Stumbling feet were frustrating, lurching as his stomach turned. He felt faint, the light bouncing against the white snow, the ice, creating a kaleidoscope that forced his eyes to blink.

"Wait," he tried to say, "please wait for me!" but it didn't reach, seemed to leave his lips and stop flat, as if the air itself were thick.

My god, I can't breathe. I'm so scared, please don't leave me! Help me, *help me* !

He remembered this. He remembered *this.*

He *remembered this.*

Running. He was running, the air ice cold as it was drawn harshly in, throat wheezing, painful. Raw. HIs legs ached and his mind raced. He felt sick, in many ways; physically it caused his stomach to cramp, and in his mind the very thoughts of dying, of him dying, of her dying, of them dying and being apart...they were making him ill.

The trees were only getting in the way, but also continued to keep their pursuers from them. If they ran fast enough, if they found somewhere to hide, everything would be alright. If they could just get far enough, they could escape..!

" Skynde sig! Skynd dig, de fanger os!" he cried, glancing back to make sure she was still there; still running.

Walking towards the scent of a death ready to happen, his fingers curled, flexing. There, laying sprawled against a large rock, legs flopping down onto the ground across the stream, was a white-tailed deer. Its abdomen fluttered with panicked breath, and its eye a sheen of fear. In its body, a gory hole leaking *red* ; a bullet made to kill. The icy waters didn't register as he stepped lightly across.

***When his hands touched he expected feathers, but there were none* . Smiling, Will closed his eyes and put his face against the animal's side.**

"Everything will be alright," he said, but his words were not his own and the somewhere deep down, beyond his own memory of who he was, he felt sick with terror at the sound, *the unnatural sound of his voice* , "I'm going to save us."

A hand against the creature's head, and then another, and it wrenched one way, and then the other, the bones cracking and the skin ripping. Hot, wet blood rushed across his hands like sweet wine. Behind him he could hear the coyotes snarling at one another, biting at flanks, trying to be the one closest to the treat. When he brought the head in his hands to his mouth, the meat was sweet and chewy against his teeth. He closed his eyes and savoured the feel, the taste, before opening them once more and carelessly throwing the head behind him. The snarls and yelps devolved into fighting.

"Sweet *Jesus* ," a voice exclaimed softly from his right.

Breaking branches, breaking twigs, the sound of dogs. He didn't want to, he didn't want to but he had to. Looking over his shoulder he let out a short cry; figures in the distance, moving among the trees, the snuffling of hounds, the sight of rifles. He forced himself to move faster, faster, even as the cold ate at him. There were tears in his eyes and he felt scared.

Again, the red. Like a scarf in the distance. Rushing forwards he ran into trees, bounced against young boughs that seemed to shatter, raining ice against his hair.

"Please," he wheezed through lungs that couldn't cope, "please..."

They were close, so close. He could hear them shouting their hatred, their vitriol, he could hear the barking of the dogs, the slavering at their jowls. Panicked breaths only drew crystal icy cold into his body again and again and again and...

All he had were the footsteps before him, following them like a lifeline he climbed a short pile of sticks and logs. He knew too late that they had begun to move, rolling and tripping him; he fell, tumbling, a bruising pain against his face. And then, everything went quiet. Sudden, blanketing, horrifying quiet.

A sound of falling trees, of falling logs, of her *falling. The fear of death drove him forwards, but the greater fear of her death drove him to stop, to turn and run back.*

"Mischa!" he tried to keep his voice down even as he wanted to scream her name.

Nothing. Nowhere. No sign of her little black coat and her bright blonde hair. Panic. He felt...panic. And so his feet were running, back over freshly laid footprints in the snow. Back towards the foe they were fleeing, even as it made his heart beat fast enough to think it might stop.

When he found the way, when he saw the fallen tumble of logs, he leapt without thinking.

Slowly, carefully, his eyes looked towards the source of the sound. There stood a man in a camouflaged shirt and a green gilet and cap, rifle gripped in white knuckled fingers. Tipping his head, Will watched the man with a smile.

His mind was an open book, like flicking his fingers across the pages, curling the paper. Not just his thoughts, he felt as if he could see from the man's own perspective. Through his eyes. Could see himself, clothed in nothing but red against his skin, his eyes nothing but black.

The coyotes were growling and padding, a deep, throaty snarl like a wrecked engine. A pack of eyes in the gloom of dawn, bobbing around him, focused in on the prey.

"D-don't..." the man stuttered, eyes impossibly large, *fear stinking up the air as he tried to raise his gun* , "what are you..?"

***What are you?* The body of Will Graham did nothing but smile.**

Blinking up at the sky, so clear and white above, he sat up with a sob. Cold, still. Quiet. He was on the edge of a clearing, wide and flat, filled with virgin snow. The trees seemed to stand around him like sentinels, watching for movement. And there, at the centre, was a large black lump dusted with fine white like sugar.

"Bror?" he found his lips moving, but the word that escaped was foreign on his tongue; frowning, Will struggled to his feet and rubbed his hands together.

Nothing. No sound, no movement but the falling snow. Walking forwards seemed as if it were the last thing he wanted to do, and yet...he could not stop. Looking all around as his feet tripped forwards, there was no sign of their pursuers. No sign of the red scarf. Only the large lump that, as he drew closer and left little footprints in the snow, he could see was actually a haunch, and a back, and maybe even antlers.

Sniffing, he stood beside the animal and shook. Everything would be alright, he thought suddenly. Yes, everything would be alright. Safe. He was safe here? He'd seen this before, hadn't he? When he reached out his hand, it was small and pale. Swallowing, frowning, he touched the hide of the animal and gasped at the warmth.

Feathers, he realised as the animal stirred, raising its head from the ground where it had been curled in against its legs, it was covered in feathers. As it turned he felt his heart stop, a large black eye falling upon him. Somehow, somewhere, he thought he could feel a voice against his skin, piercing through his flesh and into his mind where it stirred around, black as tar, unknowable. Heart hammering in his chest, his mouth fell open and he stuttered but could not speak.

A voice came from behind him, "Nej! Nej, kom væk derfra!"

“Nej! Nej, kom væk derfra !”

He was running without fear, because he had never feared his own harm over her own. Ever since she was born, he had known he would love her. Little hands that sat in his own like a doll’s, a cherub’s face that could only smile because her mind was pure. When mother had let him hold her, he had sung her a lullaby and she had blown bubbles, waving her stumpy arms in her little lace fringed dress.

So it was natural to run towards her, even as his body told him to stop in fear, to halt, petrified, at the sight of the ***thing*** *rearing up before them. She was all he could see, even as the things that lived in the woods came alive and saw them.*

His mother had told him, he thought as he pushed his sister out of the way, shielded her body. Almost every night, she would tell him the tales from the handwritten book she kept locked away in her armoire, of the beasts that lived beyond the walls of their estate. The reason they only travelled by daylight in the carriage, and why never to go into the forest that lay between them and town. Out here, in the countryside, they had to be careful. But papa would protect them, and mama would teach him, and little Mischa, she would give him the want to learn and grow strong.

When he looked down he could feel the pain, he thought, though it was distant, like a shore he could not reach. He could see the blood. It pumped in gouts, down onto the snow, past his hands even as he tried to press them futilely against his clothes, against the ruptured gash curling his skin across his abdomen.

Looking up at the beast, up into its eyes as it watched him, claws bloody, Hannibal knew that everything had been for nothing.

His mother, he thought as the beast lunged with a scream, would be ashamed of him.

The man tried to step backwards but stopped. Tipping his head, he narrowed his eyes. A gurgling choke, and a line of red began to leak from the man’s nose. Approaching carefully, feet dainty and delicate in their placement, Will felt the paws behind him close in, fur brushing against his legs. The man was unable to move and yet he wished to, he wished to run but he could not. Reaching up, Will dabbed his finger gently into the stream of blood dripping across the man’s face, bringing it back to taste, eyes closing.

When the hand grabbed at the back of his neck Will fell with a pull, the world slipping out from under his feet as the creature stood, shaking the ground, four long legs with hoofed feet, roots above its head, roots trailing the ground, a proud head letting out a bleating cry. He couldn’t look away. Couldn’t, even as the red scarf covered his vision and the forest shook and the ground trembled and screaming, screaming, screaming...

Breathing was laboured and hellish. He felt smothered, desperately trying to fight his way out from under the clothing, the weight of a body. Crawling was all he could do, scrabbling as he turned over and pulled and pulled. And then the illusion became difficult to distinguish, and then all too real to ignore.

Not just the scarf. There was red. There was red everywhere. The young boy lay there, coughing and gasping, blood so fresh and fast it appeared almost black against the snow as it pooled. Above him stood the creature, tall and sniffing the air, like a nightmare trying to sense the truth of reality. He wanted to run, but his feet stayed glued, even as he watched the creature reach down and envelop the body of the boy in its hands, a horrible sound emanating from its form, feathers ruffling. When the boy was dropped back to the ground he was motionless. Will was crying, sobbing, he wanted nothing but to run.

“Brother!”

And when the boy awoke he could have screamed for joy. Thought he could feel the breath in his body once more. He lost his numb feet and ran straight to him as the boy stood, feet slipping in the blood that blemished the snow. Running, he tumbled into his arms and tried to push at him, pull him away.

“Please,” he was trying to say, “please..!”

“Everything will be alright,” the boy said, voice sounding far away, distorted and soft, barely there, eyes staring into the distance, “I’m going to save us.”

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*It was strange, to think about it here. To remember it like this. Moments in his life when he had been happy, or sad, or concerned, or apprehensive, they all seemed to live here, trapped behind this wall he had built. This wall **it** had built. Built and rebuilt, as his body was remade, as his body was cursed, as he was pulled apart and put back together again.*

*He could smell it on the air. Thrumming like a cello string, deep and resonant. **Flesh.***

Things always changed. Nothing stayed the same. When he was put back down onto the snow, he knew that he might be sad to know it. Things couldn’t stay the same. Sometimes one would drop the tea cup they were holding and it would shatter, he thought as he turned to her and watched as she grabbed him, crying, shaking, pleading. Sometimes the teacup shattered, never to come back together.

“Everything will be alright,” he said as the hunter’s eyes began to puff and redden, bloodshot, “I'm going to save us”

Behind him, he could hear as the coyotes tore into the deer, shredding the sweet meat apart. And before him, as flesh started to curl and slide and slick away to the tune of a voice raised in terrible pain.

Only nothing moved here. No sound, no air, no warmth. Nothing but the snow, falling. His vision was cloudy with tears as he looked up into eyes black as coal, normally so kind and loving that it jarred him to see it.

And then suddenly it was him. It was suddenly, sickeningly familiar. It was the last thing he expected to see.

Hannibal Lecter stared back at him as if he thought Will shouldn't be there.

"No one has ever..." he heard himself say.

Part of him thought he might be upset, but it was odd to know that was nothing but a memory. The world around them wavered and pulled, shook itself like a dog desperate to throw the snow from its fur.

He found himself staring into grey eyes beneath dark curls, face shocked and bright. Will Graham looked as if he knew he shouldn't be there.

"No one has ever..." he heard himself say.

...looked *back* **at** me *from* **the** other *side* **before.**

Dawn, against his eyes. It was disagreeable. Lifting a hand with a sigh, Hannibal tried his best to wake up slowly. If there was anything he detested more, it was a rude awakening. Outside, there were birds singing and squawking at one another. *A dawn chorus.* Beautiful but grating.

Grey eyes, staring at him, shocked. He thought he could still see the image in his mind's eye, if he tried hard enough. Blinking as he ran his hand through his hair, perhaps it was odd that he smiled. *Was it from happiness or from shock?* He thought that it might be both, but considering the toll his body had taken it was difficult to tell. The toll his mind had endured. It had been...no, never. It had never happened before. Not once, in all his years.

Opening his eyes, Hannibal peered down along his body, only half under the duvet. *Empty* . Will was missing. This was not a revelation, nor was it the first time Will had escaped his grasp while connected to him. Still, it was yet to become something he found normal. Rather jarring, really.

Sitting up, Hannibal yawned, baring his teeth, and stretched. The activities of the night before revisited themselves upon him through the scent still on his unwashed skin. Lifting his forearm up to his face, he breathed in deeply and shivered savagely with an involuntary purr.

"Close, now," he whispered against his knuckles, dragging them against sensitive lips, "very close."

Getting up was unpleasant, *he did not enjoy the still tired feeling in his limbs* , but necessary. Climbing back into rumpled clothes was another black mark. It had been a long time since he had allowed another to make him anything less than immaculate. The thought itself was odd, as he buttoned up his shirt and walked out into the hallway, down the stairs.

Will Graham . The name was becoming savoury on his tongue. *Foolish* , he thought, *very foolish.*

A cursory search revealed no central heating, and instead he flicked on the immersion switch and listened as the plumbing rattled into life. When he reached the kitchen he found a pair of ratty slippers by the door, sliding into them to keep his feet from the cold tile floor. Foraging got him a box of homemade peppermint tea bags from the countertop, *if the smell was anything to go by,* and

a mug from a wooden tree-like structure holding the items all jumbled; further invasion into cupboards got him a kettle.

A caw, loud and brash . It caught his attention as he filled the kettle and placed it upon the gas stovetop. Outside the window the stark black and white of a magpie danced back and forth, stopping to tip its head dramatically, watching him.

“My, my,” he found himself saying as he looked past the impressive bird to the garden beyond.

He left the kettle to boil, keeping his movements quiet and calm as he left by the backdoor. Outside, the air was chill with a heavy feel of moisture on the air; *it would snow soon, he was sure* . Will’s garden was a rather irritating profusion of plants all jumbled and growing together, interlocking branches and stems, full of the chaos of life. The dog rose was flowering out of season, as were the peonies and the violas. There were sweet-peas growing on twisting vines and raspberries puffing out in clusters beyond thorny branches.

And there, facing away from him and perfectly still, stood Will Graham. He was naked, Hannibal noted, *remembering Abigail’s tale of Will’s nightly exploits running bare in the woods with his pack.* Only, Hannibal was sure Abigail would have mentioned if Will also returned slaked in red. For he was. Over his hands and up his arms. As Hannibal prowled around him, taking in every fine detail, Will stayed motionless; when he finally stood in front of him, he noted Will’s eyes were closed.

His chest was a Jackson Pollock, dripped with blood which continued to speckle its way down across his body in secret little patterns, all the way to his ankles. Looking up, Lecter could see why. His jaw and around his mouth was painted like at a children’s party. All around his cupid’s bow lips the blood was drying to a rusty brown, patches still bright and shining where it had yet to do so. Sniffing, Hannibal regarded him, tipping his head.

Perhaps it was the lingering fingers from his dream, his unexpected dream, *his shock to know that someone might see him, truly see him, as those grey eyes had looked back at him from the other side...*

But in that moment Will Graham was more beautiful to him than anything he had ever seen. A strange sensation, like two pieces of wire twisting together until it was difficult to tell them apart . *Isn’t this what you wanted?* He asked himself. Truly, he wasn’t sure if it was or was not. He certainly hadn’t known what to expect of this experiment, only the outcome he wanted to reach. But this was the closest he’d come in all the years since he had lost her.

All the years since he’d become incomplete.

Touching Will’s skin he found the man freezing. Gooseflesh raised under Hannibal’s fingers as he closed his palm around the arm. When he did not stir, Hannibal prodded further.

“Will?” he asked.

No response, and yet as Hannibal put pressure against him Will moved, unseeing feet moving where they were pushed. Behind him, the magpie cawed again and another two smaller birds descended from the large oak tree above. All three sets of beady black eyes watched as Lecter led Will back into his home and shut the door.

The kettle had boiled. Hannibal left Will standing in his kitchen like a mannequin while he made up a basin of hot water, slicked through with a few pumps of dish-soap. A large, well used tea-towel

lent itself to cleaning, and was easy to hand; Hannibal enjoyed the feel of the warm, soapy water as he submerged the towel and began cleaning. It was almost therapeutic, he thought with a smile as he wiped away the speckles and the streaks, pulling away a chunk of gore from the corner of Will's mouth.

The cloth was rinsed from carmine to clean again and again. Once he felt satisfied, Lecter stopped and observed. It was a risk, but perhaps he no longer cared so much about those. Reaching out, Hannibal cupped Will's cheek with one hand as he used the other to slide open Will's eyelid like a roller-blind.

Nothing but black .

Letting it go, the eyelid slunk back into place, closed. Hannibal took a deep breath and let it out slow. Taking his feet from his slippers, he walked to the front door and slid them into his well shined shoes, lacing them carefully.

It wasn't a long walk, but perhaps an odd one. The memory of the dream of the memory, it stuck to him. As he walked through the trees, he thought he could feel a remnant of the panic, perhaps, the fear, maybe, or the shock.

No one had ever looked back at him from the other side before.

But he did not allow it to faze him. When had he ever? Such a long time ago. Since then, life had been simple at least. *A long life with a single goal* , he thought as he finally came across the gory scene deep in the Wolf Trap forest, *to see her again.* There was not much left of the hunter, for so Hannibal assumed the ragged, bloody corpse was from what was left of his camouflaged, torn clothing and the bent and broken rifle lying off to the right by a small stream. Around him pairs of eyes, alight with tapetum lucidum, watched with skittish intensity, as if unsure whether to run or defend their food.

"No need to worry about me," he said with a smile, sensing the coyote's ease, "enjoy your meal."

Cleaning up was something he'd become used to, he thought as he took the clothes and the gun, burying them deep in the frozen earth before returning to the one who would make his world whole again.

Water, lapping. He was warm. Maybe too warm. *Hot* . Wetness against his hands, his legs, arms, body...

Opening his eyes in a cautious squint had him cursing, lifting a sopping hand from the water to cover his eyes from the morning glare.

"Jesus fucking *christ* ," Will muttered as he peered down from beneath his forearm at the water, shivering in little waves with every drip from his skin; the heat from his arm pressed against his forehead was blissful, "am I...did you draw me a bath? I don't remember waking up."

That he had known Lecter would be there, kneeling next to him holding a small plastic jug Will sometimes used to wash his hair if he was in a hurry, wasn't something he wanted to overanalyse. The man didn't reply at first, simply pushed the jug into the bathwater with a sloshing *floop* before lifting it and depositing it slowly and gently across Will's hair.

“Uh-nn,” was all Will could manage, his groan somewhat indecent as he felt the heat melt the miserable, splitting headache that was beginning to make itself known; it jetted between his temples like a heavy buzz, thumping in time with his heart, “fuck *me* . Shit,” for a moment he simply breathed through his nose; rubbing at his face he realised he'd let his stubble grow in a bit too far, *scratchy against his palms*, and then, “Paracetamol. Please.”

“I think it might be imprudent to leave you alone while submerged,” Lecter’s voice was slightly gravelly, as if from lack of sleep, but no less soporific and calming than always.

“If I drown you can just give me mouth to mouth, eh?” Will tried to grin but it came out as nothing but a grimace, lowering his arm back into the heat of the bath, “please, could you..? They’re in the nightstand by the bed. Blue and white packet.”

Watching him carefully for a moment, Lecter finally acquiesced, standing gracefully and walking from the room without another glance. Will savoured that, *the easy way in which Lecter seemed to give him everything he asked for while simultaneously keeping his motivations fuzzy.* Listening to the sounds of the man walking around his house, his sacred space, opening drawers and fussing through their contents...it was both exhilarating and terrifying somehow. It almost made it stupid, or exciting, *or both*, to think for a moment of the night before. Lecter had been attentive. *Kind and attentive, but predatory in his wants.* Will shivered, despite the heat of the water, and scratched at his skin, licking his lips out of habit. *Hands and lips and eyes tracing the lines of his skin, of his being, whispering beautiful things as they outlined his desire*. It had been almost disappointing to realise he'd fallen asleep, but then...

Flashes of a dream. Remnants of a memory. Maybe, he wasn’t sure. All he could remember, all he could recall, was a pair of startled, maroon eyes staring at him.

No one had ever stared back at him from the other side before... Only they had. He had felt this before. The first, at Melinda Inman's house as he had reconstructed the crime scene, he had looked up and the **thing** ...it had been watching him...

Opening his eyes was the only reason Will realised he’d closed them. Realised that the water had reached his ears and his mouth. He sat up a little fitfully, hating that the sudden movement jarred his headache and his aching muscles. He groaned, grabbing blindly for the edge of the bath to keep him steady. It was cold beneath his fingers.

Panic . He breathed through his nose, carefully and steadily. *Panic, the thought of water gushing down into his lungs.* Opening his mouth when his nose couldn’t offer enough oxygen, taking a deep breath, filling his lungs until they felt as if they would burst, puffing out the air in a rush and then repeating. *Panic that he would drown, was drowning, had already drowned.*

Mama... he stopped the thought cold, before it could go any further. The awkward, blissful thoughts of the night before were trapped along with them. It stung. *No room for the things he cared about in the bone arena of his mind; everything jumbled together like a bad recipe.* The truth seemed to flutter just out of sight, like light bouncing upon water, tickling his senses. Only he didn't scratch the itch, and it was damning enough to know it. *Don't want to understand, do you*, he thought derisively. Once you knew, there was no going back; Will knew that more than most. **The thing**. *Lecter.* Miriam. This case.

Delicate hands touching his jaw as lips kissed his face, and sweet words poured into his ear, '*to think such beauty would flower in the dark, my darling'.* Part of him wanted to hold onto this feeling a little longer, believe in it just a little longer, *even if it made him a fool*. Just a little.

When he opened his eyes Will wished Hannibal had drawn the blind down on the window. It was too bright in here. Smacking his tongue against the roof of his mouth a couple of times, Will frowned, mouth twisting distastefully as he listened to the sounds of Lecter returning from the bedroom.

“Ugh, my mouth tastes like crap,” he said, using his nails to scrape at his tongue, “fuck.”

“Here,” Lecter offered; Will took them carefully, watching the man while he opened the packet and popped the pills. Hannibal drew him a glass of water from the sink, kneeling down to lean against the bath before handing it over. Taking the pills in silence with eyes closed, Will tried to imagine they began working immediately, as soon as they hit his stomach. It was the only psychosomatic relief he was able to offer himself.

Drip, drip, drip . Will sniffed.

“Yesterday, Brian asked if I was alright.”

“Oh?”

“I think...” Will sighed, feeling the water slosh against his skin, “it was a bit premature to say yes.”

“Headaches still getting worse?” Hannibal asked, stroking the wet curls from Will’s forehead, fingers lingering against his scalp.

“Mmm,” Will affirmed lazily; he listened, not paying attention, as Lecter picked up the bar of soap from the corner of the bath, dipping it into the water before lathering his hands. It was easier to stay still, stay quiet, stay passive as a hand swamped in soap ran across his chest. As he peered through slitted eyelids, Will watched Hannibal care for him and felt hollow, “why won’t you tell me the truth?”

The hand continued its work and Lecter concentrated on washing him until he was satisfied. Will remained quiet, as if listening for any hint of a reply. The strong fingers found the bottle of cheap shampoo and washed his hair, rubbing roughly against his scalp. An odd sensation, *the pills were kicking in slowly,* to feel such gentle pain. He wished he could bring himself to tell the man to stop. Staring down at the water, his mind ached. When Hannibal asked him to dip his head back into the bath to rinse the suds away, Will shook his head slowly.

The feel of water deep in his lungs, choking, suffocating, drowning. It was too close.

Nodding, Lecter used the plastic jug he’d left on the floor to do the job. Soap sloughed away into the bath, bobbing around him like little icebergs. By the time he was finished, Will felt shaky. Hannibal fetched a towel and helped him to stand. Feeling his legs give a little, feet slipping, Will grabbed at Hannibal anxiously, catching him around the neck while reciprocating arms gripped him around the middle, across his back. A hand splayed against his neck, moving in jumpy little squeaks against his clean skin. His body steamed in the chill air.

“Because I fear you are not yet ready to hear it,” Hannibal finally said, calm words by his ear.

“Oh?” Will said breathily, “and here I thought you weren’t afraid of anything.”

A small, closed-lipped laugh, the hands holding him slid against wet flesh. Will stepped out of the water while he had the support. As Lecter helped him into the large towel, he forced himself to

push his paranoia to the back of his mind. No place for that right now, not when Abigail was still in danger, not when everything around him was falling apart.

“Hey,” Will said as Lecter looked down at his shirt and trousers, noting the large wet stain with unimpressed eyes, “can I ask a favour?”

“Of course,” Lecter said as he brushed at his clothes with the hand towel that hung by the sink, looking up through his lashes.

He hesitated, perhaps not only because the thought was grim, but more likely because it was admitting to a defeat he felt might be somehow inevitable. And that scared him.

“If anything, I mean...if something happens to me,” he said, swallowing, rubbing at his skin with the towel absently, “you’ll look after Abigail. Make sure she’s ok.”

“We will need to find her first,” Lecter said, raising a brow; Will wondered if the man was simply good at reading him, or if his face had given away his distress, “and when we do, I will make sure she is taken care of.”

“Just in case?” Will asked.

“Just in case.”

The drive back seemed longer somehow, which never happened to her. She was always happy to be on the highway when heading back to Baltimore. Ever since moving away, she’d always enjoyed the feeling of returning, like she was coming home.

This time, not so much. Maybe it was that she was distracted. Yes, she could use that as an excuse. When she woke up in her hotel and found five missed calls from Will, there had been a spike of worry. Only she couldn’t bring herself to call him back. Not right now. The next time they spoke, she would have to tell him. Not over the phone. Not like that.

Maybe not ever.

It would be difficult, she knew that, but secrets only bred resentment. Which was why she called Beverly Katz before she called Will Graham. Three rings and she was through.

“Katz speaking,” the voice was tired.

“Hi Beverly, it’s Alana Bloom.”

“Oh, hey. Actually, Jack has been asking for you.”

“I...he has?” she was derailed.

“Yeah, he’s been raging about the office this morning on a witch hunt,” Beverly sounded sardonic, though there was a hint of truth in her voice Alana didn’t like, “have you seen Will? No one can reach him.”

“Uh, no. He tried to call me last night but I was out of town. What’s wrong? Has something happened?”

“There’s been another one. Murder, that is. I think Jack is worried Will’s going to ground. Heard he can be pretty touchy when the chips are down.”

“More like fragile,” Alana said, unable to hep being defensive, “listen, I can help find him. But first I need some info. Did Will tell you where his mother was staying while she was here?”

“What? No,” Beverly sounded like she thought it was odd Alana would even ask her, “But maybe, wait a sec- *Brian*.. ?”

The call fell away, became muffled. The sounds of far-off voices, shuffling material, and then another voice spoke, “Hi, Alana?”

“Hi Zeller,” she sighed.

“Uh, yeah, hi. Look, his Matron? Will told me she’s staying at The Ivy. I think it’s out in Midtown.”

“Great, thanks.”

“So, he didn’t tell you where he was going either huh? Shit.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, smiling to make her voice believable, “he’s done this before. Everything works out in the end, we just need to be patient.”

“...Alright, sure,” Zeller didn’t sound convinced, but he didn’t argue, “I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

“Thanks.”

By the time she arrived, she was worried she’d missed check out. If her suspicions were going to be confirmed, she needed the whole story. And if her suspicions were right, she was worried Hannah Robicheaux would be long gone by the time she reached the pleasant little carpark out front of The Ivy hotel.

“Hi,” she said, smiling pleasantly at the concierge as she walked to the desk, “I’m looking for..?”

Stopping mid-sentence had the young concierge asking if she was alright, but Alana didn’t finish her sentence because, right at that moment, she had looked through into the dining room to find a hand raised, waving to catch her attention. She excused herself, turning to walk towards the summons, mouth set. When she was motioned to, she took a seat at the table, hanging her handbag on the arm of the chair.

Hannah looked much as Alana remembered her, wizened, frail but with eyes that looked as if they were far, far younger. The dining room was empty but for them, a large, bright room filled daintily with white-clothed tables sporting bouquets at their centres. The Matron was enjoying a late breakfast of eggs, bacon, toasted seed bread and fried tomatoes. There was a pot of strong smelling herbal tea by her on a cork mat, and two small, white mugs beside it.

Seeing the two mugs, Alana knew she’d been expected. The thought made her itchy, but then she hadn’t exactly thought she could sneak up on the woman. Witches had an uncanny knowledge for knowing when they were wanted, she’d learned that from Will the hard way.

“I was expecting you,” Hannah said as she reached out to pick up the teapot; Alana rushed forwards with automatic courtesy, pouring her a cup. Hannah smiled at her, pointing to the other and speaking only as old ladies could, with a comforting, gentle authority, “oh come now, have yourself a cup too. You look like you need it.”

And she did, so she poured. It was hot and tasted sweet, like oranges and cardamom. Taking a long breath in through her nose, Alana sat and worried about Will Graham. She found she’d done that a lot, since she’d met him. Spent their time apart worrying about him.

“You know,” Hannah said, taking a quiet slip and sighing, “I really thought it might be you, in the end.”

“I’m sorry?” Alana asked, startled.

“That he would end up with, Will I mean. He really loves you, you know.”

“I...” she wanted to deny it, but it was too damning; remember why you’re here, she chastised herself, “I know.”

“But inevitability is a bitch,” Hannah snorted out a sad laugh, shaking her head, “and fate doesn’t like to be usurped.”

“I don’t believe in fate,” Alana said, eyes set, latent anger keeping her movements precise.

“Then you’re a fool,” Hannah said without heat, raising her brows high enough to disappear into the swathe of painted silks wrapped around her head, “there are some forces in this world that even those with magics can't supersede.”

“And what about those without it?”

“Carried along in the tide...” Hannah looked down at the table, pushing her plate away.

“Bullshit,” Alana interrupted, levelling a stern stare, “and just an excuse. An excuse people use when they know they’ve done something they regret, right?” leaning forwards, Alana folded her arms and tipped her head, trying to catch Hannah’s eye; it didn’t work. Instead, she dipped her hand into her purse and brought out the redacted police report, sliding it across the table. Hannah stayed still, not reaching for it, “I know what happened. I know you took him, when he was a child. He wasn’t dropped on your damn doorstep like a lost orphan. You lied to him, and I want to know...” she stopped, taking a deep breath as she ran out of steam, rubbing at her right eye; when she looked back to Hannah she seemed older somehow, more normal, “Will means a lot to me too,” Alana said, reasoning, “I just want to know the truth.”

And even though she was always one to stick to the courage of her conviction, when Hannah looked up Alana was shocked to see her eyes were swimming with tears above her kind smile. As she blinked they ran rivers across her wrinkled face, “I always loved him like he was my own. And now I’m scared I’ll lose him...”

“Hannah, please,” Alana reached out to take one of her hands, face serious, “tell me.”

The Matron nodded, sniffing. With her free hand she picked up a thick napkin and dabbed at her face, trying to regain some of her composure, pursing her lips.

“You ain’t going to like it,” Hannah said, shaking her head, “but then I suppose you won’t let me away with keeping it to myself. And who knows, maybe it will do some good, in the end.”

As Alana Bloom held Hannah’s hand and listened, she felt as if her world was made of edges; parallel to others, never touching. A series of people she thought she knew, but whose minds and lives had always been unknown to her, had always been shrouded. As bridges began to be built, as Hannah began to tell her the story, she wondered if it was too late to burn them and run.

“I’ll drive.”

“It is most telling, you are aware of that I hope, how controlling of your environment you become when...”

“Don’t psychoanalyse me right now. You won’t like what you get.”

“And here I thought that, after last night, you would have stood by your promise to be nicer to me.”

Will gave Lecter an aloof stare as he leaned against the driver’s side door, hand held out, plam up. After a moment he cracked, smiling, shrugging as he let out a self-conscious laugh.

“Come on,” Will insisted, jiggling his hand encouragingly, “if you like you can exposit about my absurd perception of authority and control for the whole journey, but I still want to drive.”

“Very well,” Hannibal sighed, placing the keys purposefully in his hand, sliding his fingers over Will’s with an almost charming obviousness; Will held Lecter’s stare, watching him out of the corner of his eye as the tall man stepped around the car to the passenger’s side. Once Lecter was out of sight, getting into the car, Will took a moment to grin to himself.

This from the man who just admitted to me he’s planning to spend the rest of his life as a hermit. He heard the words in her voice, remembered them as Miriam speaking a truth as if she hadn’t wanted to voice it. He half expected to see her again, as if summoning a phantom at will. Ducking his head, he muted his grin and closed his eyes.

“I promise I’ll try my best not to fuck this one up,” he whispered to them both, before turning and getting into the car.

The drive back into Baltimore was steady on the highway, traffic its usual nightmare of accordioning, overtaking and honking. Will did his best to stay calm, keep focused. *No use to anyone if you’re riled up* , he thought. *Haste makes waste* , as Hannah liked to say. Thinking of her didn’t help his calm. Will frowned to himself, biting at his thumbnail as he slowed the car to a stop. Frowning, he took his nail from his mouth and grimaced at the bitter taste on his tongue. Deep under his nail was rust red, *like blood* . Shaking his head, he blinked his eyes harshly.

“So, I have one idea so far, and it’s pretty damn miserable,” Will said as the cars in front began to move again, “so I’m relying on you here.”

“Always nice to be held in high esteem,” Lecter said glibly, looking out of the window as they finally reached the outskirts of the city, “I was hoping to reach Abigail's father, thought perhaps she would return to him as a lifeline.”

“Shit,” Will said, shaking his head as he changed gear.

“No good?” Hannibal looked insulted.

“It’s not that,” Will said, offering him a small, apologetic smile, “just that was my one idea, too.”

“I see. Then great minds think alike.”

“And fools seldom differ,” Will amended automatically, taking the turn off; tapping his hands on the wheel he flicked on the radio, hoping that news stations might have something helpful, signs of a runaway, signs of a shifter spotted in the area, *anything that could stem the suffocating guilt crawling his system,* “you know, if anything happens to her...”

“You feel perplexingly responsible for her, don’t you,” Lecter asked, index finger against his lips, eyes distant.

“Perplexing is a bit harsh,” Will said, slowing at a junction, “anyway, I don’t expect most people to understand. She asked me for sanctuary, it’s a sacred pact.”

“I did not think you were one for tradition.”

“I’m not,” Will agreed, “but there’s a difference between tradition and rules. A witch tradition is something like,” he rolled his hand in the air and puffed out a breath, “I don’t know, that Elders cover their hair. Rules are things like always having thirteen in a coven. Some things just are, they can’t be broken.”

“Everything can be broken,” Lecter argued, “there are simply more or less consequences depending on the circumstances.”

“Well, that’s a far more practical way of explaining it, I guess,” Will said; flicking his eyes to his phone he gestured to Lecter, “hey, would you do something for me? I want to know if...”

They had picked the perfect conditions. Later, when he was able to look back rationally, he would wonder if they had known he would have the sun in his eyes. Known that he would have only one hand on the wheel. Know that he would turn right instead of left. But then he would force himself to stop, before he drove himself crazy with it.

A woman in the road, right in front of them.

As if she had materialised from nowhere.

For a moment, time seemed to slow to nothing, stretching out, but his hands couldn’t move fast enough, his feet couldn’t move fast enough.

Will felt the breath enter his throat and the world seemed to slam back to normal, suddenly zero to a hundred. His eyes widened in shock before he cried out, “ *Christ* !”. They veered wildly to the right. The car caught on the embankment, wheels digging up the grass, sliding in the mud as he tried to regain control. The moment it raised beneath them he could feel the tipping point, *feel the very precise moment that the car became too heavy for the angle* . It was a jolt in the stomach, and then a feeling of freefalling as the car lurched, and then rolled, sliding along on its roof with an awful scraping sound.

Hissing. There was a hissing, and a wailing in his ears. Will retched, trying to undo his seatbelt as it cut into him, jammed tight around his stomach and chest.

“You...” he coughed roughly, hands shaking, “are you ok?” he managed to choke out as he fell from the seat as his belt unclipped, “Hannibal?”

The first thing he saw was the gravity in his stare, then heard the seriousness in his tone as Lecter said his name with such strictness that the surprise at hearing it was almost enough to shake him from his stupor, *“Will..!”*

But perhaps it had always been too late. When the driver’s door was ripped from its hinges Will felt the air freeze in his lungs, struggling to right himself in the wreck, to see what was coming. When he was grabbed by the ankle and pulled it was as if he were nothing but a child, fingers dragging over the seat, the wheel, trying to grab at twisted metal, his heartrate doubled. He thought he could hear people shouting, cars honking, but it was all a dull, background haze. *He couldn’t understand, there was no time, no time!* The grass dug up under his hands as he thudded into the ground harshly, rolling over.

And there, above him, was a wild eyed harbinger. *The woman who had stood in the road.* All blonde hair and smudged red lipstick over sneering teeth, perfect hair pulled and loose, smart white clothes; high society gone postal. Will found himself shaking from the adrenaline, his body alight with pain and shock. As he tried to stand she leapt upon him, a solid punch in the solar plexus like a freight train. He saw stars, rolling to the side as he doubled in on himself, breath stuck in his throat.

He thought he could see Lecter there, fighting his way from the car but then...but then there were claws. Black claws, long and shearing through bottom of his car like a tin can opener. And there, atop his upturned car was a man, just as feral, crouched as he jammed his hand again and again into the undercarriage. Hannibal was forced to stop as the knife-like appendages scored through, sometimes missing, and sometimes making contact.

Maybe it was the blood, he thought. Maybe it was the shock. The adrenaline. *Lots of factors rolled into one big shit sundae* . Only, he knew what it was. Knew it wasn’t the shock. Wasn’t the blood. It was the sound. Lecter hissing in pain. Hurt. Injured. *Might die.* That was when he came to his senses, knew where he was, *came to* . No time to think, not time to analyse, only to act.

“Cuimilt!” he sat up as best he could and grabbed her by the arm, listening to her roar of fury as her white suit jacket ran with black blood as her skin split; the sound was awful, like the squeal of metal against metal as it was stripped and shorn. He was only afforded a single moment to be amazed that the spell had done as much damage as it had, considering it normally wasn’t very affective. When her eyes alighted on him, Will knew he’d fucked up.

Her damaged skin fell away like rolls of paper or curls of chocolate leaving behind nothing but black. All he could see, all he could comprehend, was the ebony clawed hand as she reached down and grabbed him by the shirt. He was lifted as if he were nothing and swung into the car, the air beaten from his lungs, agony lancing across his back. *Something snapped, somewhere deep* . As he sucked in a breath with difficulty he felt the pain stab angrily, viciously, at his side. Spitting blood, dazed and broken. And then he was flying, landing, tumbling across the grass; it took a moment to realise he’d been thrown.

From where he lay he could see them both. The man on the car beating it inwards while the woman laughed and spoke words he didn’t understand. Trying to get up was a mistake, but he had to do

something, had to get away, had to *help..!*

"Keep him busy, Clark," he heard her say, voice alight with hysterical vanity.

The woman turned, looking self-satisfied as the man continued to crumple the car in around Lecter, still stuck, at his mercy. His vision blurred as she grabbed him by the arm and started dragging him across the ground.

"Stop," he wheezed, "FBI agent, you're in serious shit.." he tried his best to intimidate but it fell through like keys down a drain.

"I know who you are," she said as she hauled him up and thrust him into a waiting car, reaching back her hand and smiling viciously, "Will Graham."

With the next punch he felt his brain rock in his skull, pain searing, jaw slack. And another, to take away the last of his consciousness.

Smell of a new car.

Sounds of an engine.

Then nothing.

Such a long time, he thought. Maybe, if he tried hard he could remember it, but then why bother? No point in wondering about something that could not occur. *Perhaps* , he thought as the claws came again, biting through his skin, *the greatest downfall of his inviolable existence was the arrogance that accompanied it.*

Allowing another beneath the shell, into his life, *allowing Will Graham close enough to be almost foolish,* he had created a crack just wide enough for others to get their fingers in and pull. *A vulnerability he would never normally allow...and yet he had.* Foolish and out of character, two things that he abhorred for their carelessness. His mission had always called for utter focus, and here he was allowing himself a dalliance.

And look where it has gotten you both, Lecter thought calmly even as the world raged around him like a wild beast. As he made to throw himself forwards, legs awkwardly stuck beneath the dashboard, the metal above him crumpled in, sealing his exit. Around them all he could hear commotion as people took notice.

"Bedelia," he said steadily, knowing she could hear him even over the commotion, "even you understand what this means. *Bedelia!"*

He had never thought she would go so far. *Using a moment of weakness, a blind spot, as an ambush.* With Will driving the car, Hannibal hadn't been fast enough to react to her attack. And now he was here, and Will was there.

When she appeared at the door, leaning down enough so they could lock eyes through the complicated mess of twisted and distorted metal, while claws continued to jam randomly through again and again, Hannibal made sure to hold her stare.

"Keep him busy, Clark," was all she said, her smile one of victory.

No matter how fleeting it would be; it was only the thought that kept him calm. Enough to feel for the window at his back. And yet, the sound of wheels peeling out onto the street tore his calm to shreds. Pushing violently backwards he felt it crack, hearing the man above him shriek in anger. Another push and it was buckling, even as the claws shredded through, tearing the metal up in runnels, open to the air. Looking up, he watched as the man, *Clark* , reared back, ready to deal a serious blow.

Waiting was his speciality. *As the arm came down, so he pushed back.* And as he felt himself fall out onto the grass, so he grabbed the vulnerable arm of his attacker and pulled. The man cried out as he half fell into the opening he had made, flailing. It was simple then, to stand. *The arm became pliable, then began to show resistance, and then went beyond that as the screaming started* .

You should have more restraint than this, he thought to himself as the arm broke, then began to tear. Wrenching once, twice, and it grated against a sharp twist of metal until it sheared, left limp and gushing in his hand. He heard someone scream as he dropped the arm and took Clark Ingram's head in his hands, enjoying with perverse pleasure as the man took his last few moments on earth to surely regret his decision to be Bedelia Du Maurier's stooge. When his skull gave way, crawling inwards with a slack snap, a ripping sound of flesh, it was all he could do to breathe in. *Scent the fine spray of blood in the air.*

Turning to walk out into the road, Hannibal confronted the crowd. The closest was the simplest to focus on; she was young, brunette, traumatised by the sight, the brutality she had witnessed. Smiling, Lecter took a moment, catching the eyes of those who stood and stared all around,

" **There was a terrible accident** ," he said, noting as she calmed, looking at him, nodding; the others followed suit, whispering to each other but no longer terrified, " **he was badly hurt** ."

"Oh my god," the woman said, swallowing as she stepped forwards, "are you ok? Oh my god, I need to call an ambulance..!"

"I would appreciate it," Hannibal said, eyes tight on the road, *on the skid marks left there as Bedelia had absconded with his prize* , holding the violence inside, slick and wild but withheld until the moment was right, "there will be casualties."

"It's like a cruel joke, isn't it?" Adebayo said as he pulled the large macroscopic lens close, peering through it as he adjusted the focus.

"What is?" Hopkins asked as he kept his eyes on the observation window; below them the room was being set up acceptably. He would have to commend the Manager of Ceremonies he'd had brought in from Mosul, the woman knew her stuff. When Adebayo didn't reply, Hopkins looked over impatiently, " *What* is?" he repeated.

"That he would get it wrong," the man said as he photographed intricate symbols on dead flesh with a flash so bright that even through his protective eyewear Hopkins winced; next to them a large machine sprang to life with a bump and a whine as it began 3D printing.

"Would you give me a little warning before you do that?" he said testily, "And you're not so stupid as to believe that are you?"

"Meaning what?" Adebayo sounded annoyed.

“That you think Lecter got it wrong,” he looked back down at the areana below them, as the symbols were painted upon the floor by technicians in warding suits, “he’s too meticulous for that.”

“Oh?” a derisive laugh, “And here I thought you hated that creature.”

“Dislike and respect are not mutually exclusive. He’s an expert in his field. After nearly three hundred and fifty years I would be disappointed if he was nothing but mediocre.”

“Huh. So, you think he did it on purpose?”

“I know he did it on purpose. She was just a misdirect. Something to keep his true goal safe for as long as possible.”

“I think I see,” Adebayo sniffed behind the mask, scrunching up and then elongating his face, making a fussy noise, “you know, I never get an itchy nose until I don’t have the ability to scratch it. That ever happen to you?”

“Just keep your eyes on your work,” Hopkins said, shaking his head, “patience is everything.”

Adebayo merely shrugged, moving the lens towards the head. The pale, blue tinged lips seemed to smile back at him, even behind the old, rotted string stiching them together. She had been his favourite subject since his arrival, *a font of knowledge even if Hopkins didn’t believe it to be so* . A window into a mind he itched to study. The symbols etched with the delicacy of a calligrapher, the handwriting of a beast that had seen the world turn for longer than any of them.

Soon , as the camera flashed, illuminating the preserved corpse of Miriam Lass, he took Hopkins’ words to heart; *patience is everything.*

Chapter End Notes

Skynde sig! Skynd dig, de fanger os! - Hurry! Hurry up, they'll catch us!

Bror - brother

Nej! Nej, kom væk derfra - No! No, get away from there

Breath

When she was five years old, her mother had taught her to dance.

Not so much waking up, as coming to.

Blurry. His eye hurt, his left eye. And hazy. His mind blared like a foghorn, shaking coherence to incoherence.

Ringing in his ears, a long atonal whine that made his world seem muted, as if hearing everything from another room.

As Will tried to focus, he felt the world sway and rumble, *his body leaning slightly left, then slightly right.* And there, behind it all, was a constant stream of someone else's thoughts.

It had been hard, but learning ballet always was. Since she'd been able to walk she'd watched her mother in the mirrored room directing girls of all ages, face stern and a switch always in her hands. It was hard, painful and strict, but so very beautiful.

YOU SHOULD WAKE UP NOW , a familiar voice spoke as if from behind his ear, bringing him to himself; he tried to blink, *left eye uncooperative* , and his eyelid scraped over his dry cornea like licking a stamp. A car. He was in the back of a car. He'd been...attacked. When he coughed, throat dry, his chest let him know his rib was broken by way of sudden agony. Not a scream or a shout that came out in the end, instead a wheeze, an expiration to try and deflate the lungs and stop the pain. As he looked around, the thoughts came again.

It wasn't something she would have chosen for herself. Her dancing was inherited rather than elected. All of the Du Maurier's since her great grandmother had danced the stage and lived for their art. And the toil and the cruelty of her mother's stern hand only reflected the world she had been brought into, used as a commodity until she too became similarly embittered.

He started to panic. Trying to speak, to cast something, *anything* , but the act was stopped before it even began. His head fell forwards, chin against his chest, allowing him to see the rope around his wrists, smell the ball of perfumed hay stuffed into the gag around his mouth, *feel the wards sewn into the cloth at his neck* . All things he knew from the stories his Matron would tell him as he practiced with her and his sisters, things he knew were designed for people like him, designed by witch hunters and religious zealots. *Things* that had been around for hundreds of years to allow those without access to magic to control those with it.

He thought of that night with the intruders, seeming so long ago now. The dogs biting through flesh to draw blood and his shotgun kicking back in his hands. *The truck full of paraphernalia designed to incapacitate someone like him.* This time the thoughts were cold as they invaded his mind. A woman's voice, that's how they came across, like they were spoken in a woman's voice. Had it been a woman all along? The Ripper..?

Not everyone was given choices. Choices were reserved for the creatures on this earth that were willing to do everything and anything to get what they wanted. Everyone else was just...debris.

IT'S CLOSE NOW. SO VERY CLOSE.

Looking through the car and into the rear view mirror he could see her, *showing the face of his attacker* . He didn't know her, had never seen her before today, and yet he found himself unable to look away. Knew it was her thoughts he was hearing. Shaking. He was shaking. Will felt the tear slip from his right eye and down his face. The pain was no longer physical, it existed within him, an empathy for a woman he had never met.

His breaths were coming shallow and swift. It was disorienting, seeing her thoughts while his head swam like he'd drawn in too much smoke. Nothing felt real. The thoughts were strange, he couldn't rationalise them, couldn't understand their place within his own life.

He could see her there, as if she were staring into a mirror in her mind's eye. *All in white, pointe shoes and long tutu as she lifted one long leg skyward, body contorted into lines and angles of stunning athletic ability. Behind her a beautiful winter scene, painted on black lacquer. Before her, an audience rapt. And amongst the faces staring up at her, was him.*

A face so familiar that it made Will's chest ache beyond the agony of his wounds . *There, amid the crowd he sat, eyes never leaving her. As she stared, she could see the tear tracks shining on his skin. At every performance he seemed to weep from the beauty of the dance and the music. The depth of his soul bared in those rare moments mesmerised her.*

As he heard the sound of a car door opening Will frowned, realising that she was leaving the vehicle. *Panic* . The world snapped back into bright, hot focus. *Danger* . What...what was he *doing here?* She had attacked them, the car had wrecked and... *oh god, Hannibal.* There had been blood, he had been *hurt* . What did she want with them? Was she the one? Was this the Ripper? Was she going to..?

Suddenly, and without warning, he caught sight of her and their eyes met. Will stiffened as her mind seemed to open like a flower blooming. He didn't want to, but it was almost impossible not to peer inside, like a child through a door left ajar while their parents argued. He was afraid and repulsed but unable to look away.

And she had loved him, she knew that, always would.

He had charmed her and she had loved him; an unconventional handsomeness, flattering words whispered in her ear, maroon eyes always upon her. She felt desired in a way she never had before. And to keep mother happy there had been wealth and breeding and an almost tangible and terrible sophistication to him.

He had used her and she had loved him; at first perhaps it had been difficult, learning the truth of his existence. Yet when he'd changed her body into that of something greater, something no longer human, it had been her choice. She wished to be with him forever, and they had carved a swathe of blood a mile wide through Europe and Asia and India, revelling in their appetites.

He had thrown her away and she had loved him still; the truth of his crusade had bitten at her, teeth going in to leave scars. She had served her purpose, failing in giving him what he needed, and yet she had crawled after him like a sick dog, desperate and lost. And he had let her. Sometimes, at her lowest, she allowed herself to admit that it might be because she amused him.

It had taken a long, long time for Bedelia Du Maurier to learn to hate Hannibal Lecter. But she had persevered.

It was so difficult to reconcile, through the fear and the adrenaline and the confusion, to be able to feel what she felt. A sudden shift like gravity reversing. To try and understand these feelings of hatred for a man he thought he might have fallen for. More than a single lifetime's worth of joy and cruelty and pain and agony and plotting of revenge.

PEOPLE LIKE TO LIE TO THEMSELVES ABOUT THE INEVITABLE, he could hear her voice, Miriam's voice, tickling the hairs at the back of his neck, **IT MAKES THEM FEEL POWERFUL.**

Will swallowed thickly, letting out a muffled groan as he tried to move his legs, the panic sharpening on realising they too were bound tightly. When the door on his left clicked and swung open he tried his best to lean away, to reach up with his restrained hands and open the other door on his right.

She should feel sorry for him, shouldn't she? He heard her think, and knew she was thinking of him, *But she couldn't. It had been such a long time since she'd been able to muster sympathy for any of the people whose lives they'd ruined. Maybe a lifetime ago, maybe then she would would have considered them kin. Maybe then they would have had their revenge, together. Instead, it had been a sick sort of satisfaction watching Graham lower his defences, fall into the same trap she had so many years ago. And to watch Hannibal do the same.*

BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT...

And he fought, as much as he could, he would always tell himself that. Will tried to push her hands away as they descended upon him, like a wolf tries to deny the bear trap closing around its leg. *Futile* . She was strong and she was determined and he could do nothing but mutter foul curses muffled by the gag and wail in pain as she dragged him across the ground, rocks scraping his face and dirt pulling in his hair. By the time she stopped Will could do nothing but curl up on his side, voice a steady repetition of breathing in and letting out a solid, restrained sound of pain like a grating alarm.

...EVERYONE DIES.

When he was picked up bodily his world tipped one way, *he saw a building, all in red,* then the other, *and a tree, large and ancient, an oak with long, broad boughs,* and then he was dropped without care. It was soft beneath his cheek, cold cloth against his face and couldn't help but frown, fingers reaching out to try and push up. Rolling over he found the woman crouching down beside him. *A box,* he thought fitfully, *I'm in a fucking box!*

"My last chance," she was saying, murmuring to herself in a voice like velvet; for a moment it was difficult to tell the difference between hearing her thoughts in his head and hearing her words out loud. She looked down at him with remorseful indifference, "you're my last chance to wound him so deeply that I hope he might die from it."

When she reached down to brush the hair from his eyes he didn't have the ability to stop her before their skin touched and his eyes rolled up into his head.

She was crying, but it was silent. Just tears falling, one after the other, coursing hot and acrid across her burning skin. She had never been so unhappy. She thought she might never be again. Perhaps, she thought as she stared at the bloody sheets laying around her on the birthing bed, at the cot beside her in which the baby lay, unmoving, skin black...perhaps she might find it simpler never to feel again.

As she rolled her head to the side she could see him there, sitting with his back against the wall, knees drawn up to rest his elbows against, hands covered in blood flopping into the middle, almost touching. When Hannibal looked up it was only his eyes that moved. He looked heartbroken. A sadness to match her own, welling deep, almost timeless in its anguish.

"I'm sorry, my darling," he said softly, lips mumbling; lifting a hand he pushed his hair back from his face, smearing red across his skin. One leg stretched out flat and he took a long breath in before letting it out in a shuddering rush, "we will try something else. I promise. I promise *."*

It had been in that moment, that horrifying moment, that Bedelia had realised he was not talking to her at all. Hannibal was talking to ***her*** *. To the girl who was always absent, and yet always present. The little shadow that dogged their footsteps, moulding Lecter's actions to its will.*

Mischa.

When he pulled back it was as if he were re-entering his body. *As if he had been expelled from his own flesh, and was now struggling to claw his way back inside.* Will choked, and then let out a cry as the pain flooded back in, *implosion not explosion* . When he caught sight of her again, *no longer through the eyes of a memory* , the woman was standing above him and leaning over to grab the edge of something. Will blinked furiously, trying to see what it was. By the time he figured it out, the air freezing in his lungs with distress, it was too late.

"After all this time, and he tries to have me killed by that miserable little band of freaks. Here I was, not knowing I'd apparently outlived my usefulness. Well, at least if I find myself unable to kill him now," she said as she began to close the lid, "I know that your death will still put a knife through his heart."

Trying to shove his hands up and over the lip of the box, *the coffin, it was a fucking coffin,* was a sheer panicked movement. The lid slammed down against his fingers and he screamed, the last of the light peeking through the gap they created shining like a flashlight on a dark night; pulling them back inside was instinct rather than logic. The lid slammed shut and the lights went out. Will felt the terror strike against him like a match, igniting his hysteria. His movements were frenzied, trying to push up against the lid, kicking with both legs, *feeling the things inside him that were broken begin to shatter and bleed* .

Then everything began to tip, then slide, then fall with a feeling that made his gut flip flop over before landing with a heavy thump.

For a moment, a strange, shaken moment, everything went quiet. With his tied hands resting against his chest, Will took short breath after short breath, as if waiting, *knowing surely what was to come but waiting nonetheless.*

The sound of dirt began to trickle down. Then it fell against the lid with muffled, heavy thumps. Then the sound began to recede, rising and rising until the silence returned. As he lay, down, *deep down,* Will Graham felt the adrenaline dwindle as his body began to chill and shock set in. He slowly turned his head to stared at the face he knew would be there next to him in the gloom, smiling with lips held together with string.

SOON, BROTHER, WE CAN BE TOGETHER. ALWAYS.

"You've got to be *kidding* me. This is wild!"

“I swear, Jimmy, if you say that one more time...”

“You put pearls before kings and they will make merry.”

“That’s...what the *hell* are you even talking about?”

“No need to be a square, Mr. Zeller.”

“Don't give me your attitude,” Brian said through gritted teeth.

“Sarcasm isn’t an attitude,” Jimmy Price said snippily, “it’s an art.”

Taking a deep breath, Brian Zeller held it and counted to ten. Hell and damn all of Price’s accolades and achievements, but he was frustrating as shit to deal with. Part of him regretted allowing Will to talk him into giving Price the news of the Seal; now, as he watched Jimmy fuss and look through journals and databases in excitement, he liked to think he had paid Will back in full for not grassing him up to Crawford about his dalliance with Freddie Lounds; *maybe even with interest.*

“This is *truly* ...” Price caught Zeller rolling his eyes and gave him a stare, “remarkable. Even if some people apparently aren’t interested in the find of the century.”

“I’ll be as excited as you want some other time, ok? Will wanted this on the down low until we’re sure, and right now we need this to help us catch these crazy fuckers before they slaughter some other poor bastard. So sue me if I’m not dancing for joy, alright?”

Tipping his head, Price walked to the table and sat down in the chair next to Zeller with a puff of air from his cheeks. The action was invasively and overly familiar, making Zeller feel the need to tell the guy to back off. Only he didn’t, *because he just wanted everything to work out ok,* and if it took being friendly then fuck it, he could be friendly.

“Sorry. I can get a little carried away,” Jimmy said, face placid, “I don’t do active field work. Permanent research status tends to dull any sense of urgency.”

“No, it’s fine, I...” Zeller sighed and rubbed at his forehead, feeling like a jerk, “ *I’m* sorry. Didn’t mean to shit all over your, whatever...find of the century,” he waved a hand at the blurry image he’d taken of the Seal on his phone, lying on the table, “I just need it to mean something useful because we’re thin on the ground for leads on this case.”

“And it does,” Price said, eyebrows raised high, nodding, “don’t you worry.”

He wanted to tell Price that he always worried, no matter what, but it wasn’t worth the effort. Or the exposure. Instead, Zeller watched and listened as best he could, even though he was worried because everything was going to shit.

“Ok. So this is going to take time to research, you understand, to fully grasp the minutiae. But I know you need something fast, so here’s what I can give you with certainty. This transformation allows me to say with certainty that our Seal is a Pleroma.”

There was a moment of silence in which Price stared at Zeller, and vice versa.

“Are you...waiting for me to say something?” Zeller asked awkwardly, staring, “Because I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I know,” Price said, making Zeller’s lips thin to a line and his fingers curl to fists; *count to fucking ten* , he told himself, “but I wasn’t sure if you’d want the full nine yards. I mean, I could *explain* what a Pleroma is, or I could just...”

“Whatever you’re going to say, I’d rather that one,” Zeller interrupted.

“...Of course,” Price sounded put out, but shrugged and carried on; standing up, he flicked on one of the large screens on the wall of the lab and brought up the picture of the Seal he and Will had found at Jessica Salome’s home. Planting a hand directly at the centre, Price turned to him, *teaching mode fully engaged by the look in his eyes* , “there are thirty-five academically recognised constructions of Sigil, or Seal as you are referring to it as...”

“Not sure I have time for the lecture...” Zeller tried to derail but Price held up a hand.

“Ah, no interruptions please,” Jimmy said; when Brian sighed and sat back in his chair, arms folded, he cleared his throat and continued, “this one here is known as a Pleroma, but I’ll admit it’s unlike any I’ve ever seen before. Most Pleroma are, by definition, a specifically higher purpose series of concepts that, when combined, create something greater than they could possibly be apart. When that is applied to a Sigil, it allows a series of lesser glyphs and runes and mathematical equations and the like to come together and do something that none of them could ever have done alone.”

Price was looking at him as if expecting a reaction, “I don’t get it,” Zeller admitted, “isn’t that just what any Seal is? A bunch of things that only work when put together in the right order?”

“It’s so nice to have the subject I’ve been studying for thirty four years summed up so concisely,” Price said facetiously, “any Seal can have a goal, but a Pleroma...it is a concept of the *divine* . It relates to a supreme creation. A completeness in contrast to deficiency. And any other Pleroma I’ve seen has always used like-minded concepts in order to create a whole. All Greek, for example. Or all Arabic. Never, *never* such a mixture of cultures and concepts as this one. And that it *worked* at all is a miracle...”

“Hey, Price, whoa,” Brian held up his hands, “focus, please, you’re losing me...”

“What I’m *trying* to say,” Price looked suddenly and worryingly serious, “is that this Seal must have taken someone with a vast and in-depth knowledge of dozens if not hundreds of languages and religions and philosophies, on top of knowing mysticism to an incredible detail, to allow them to create *this,”* he tapped the screen again, “and know that it would turn into this,” the screen changed to the blurry photo, “when triggered. It is an almost insurmountable amount of work, something I, in all my years, have never even heard of or seen any other examples of.”

Price let his hand fall to his side and swallowed, shaking his head.

“When you first brought this to me, I said that this Seal shouldn’t be able to exist. I think I should redefine that idea, and say that whoever *made* this Seal really shouldn’t theoretically be able to exist. Whoever created this,” Price looked him dead in the eye, “has the knowledge of many lifetimes at their fingertips. I thought they were an amateur making mistakes, but now I feel like the child crawling around at the feet of giants trying to understand this *thing.* ”

He couldn’t put his finger on why, but the hairs went up on the back of his neck. *A shiver through his nervous system.* Brian licked at his lips and reached up with his hand to rub at the gooseflesh, fidgeting in his chair. This was too much, *like falling down the rabbit hole* . Work was always

challenging, but at least it was normally reassuringly familiar. Working his way up from college to lab work to the CDC and then on to the FBI, his career had been linear but it had been safe. Taking the promotion to BAU had been a wild step for him, but he loved it and he wouldn't trade it for the world. It was home.

Until shit like this crept in, throwing all the rules and regulations of life out the window. Forcing him to rethink the truths of existence. *Too fucking heavy an issue.* Staring at the wall, Zeller didn't react as Jimmy once more sat down next to him.

"So...what's it do?"

"Do?" Price asked, blinking.

"Yeah, do," Brian sniffed and shook his head, gesturing to the screen, "Why'd it turn into that?"

"Oh, right, of course," Price raised a finger, shaking it, "the Anneal rune. It's very telling. Not only does it show that this Seal is definitively a Pleroma, but it also tells us a lot about its purpose; that it was designed to be preparatory."

"Ok, and you're going to explain that too, right?"

"If you'd like," Price said with a grin.

"Short answer, please."

"Fine. The short answer is that it was designed to react to a specific person, and coalesce into *this* exact rune. It is then primed and purposefully designed to be attractive to said person so they are more likely to come in contact with it and *prepare* them for a next step, which if it's Anneal must then include some sort of remaking, or perhaps transmutation is more apt."

"Prepare them? What, you mean like- *wait* , what did you just say?"

Price sighed roughly, "I said it was designed to..."

"No, no *wait*. You said it was attractive. *Purposefully* attractive to the subject of the spell."

"Yeah, of course. If it wasn't then there wouldn't be much chance of it fulfilling its purpose. Pleromas draw the subject to them naturally, like a positive and a negative."

"Oh my god," Zeller stood up and rubbed at his mouth, mind racing, "when we found it, I had to stop him from touching it, and whenever he sees a picture of it he's always tracing it with his fingers and..." looking at Price's frown Zeller he buckled, "Graham, I mean Will."

"Are you *sure* ?" Price sounded shocked and uncertain.

"Yes I'm fucking sure! I mean, he even told me he knew it was a bad idea, like he knew he shouldn't touch it but he couldn't help himself. And I knew it too, somehow, I don't know," Zeller shook his head, guilt rising in his throat, choking his words; he looked at Jimmy and scratched his nose, "I grabbed him by the wrist to stop him."

"Well, that must have been pretty," Price said, but even his sarcasm was muted at the revelation.

"Yeah," Brian shook his head, staring at the picture on the screen, "it wasn't great."

“Oh my,” Price said suddenly, blinking, then standing, looking around like he’d been hit with a bombshell, “oh *my* ! It makes sense, it does.”

“For crying out loud this is no time to be vague, *what* does Jimmy?”

“Will and Lass were friends right?” he waited for Zeller’s affirmation, “Then he would have been to her apartment. Would have set off the Seal. And the only reason he couldn’t get to it was because it was somewhere so foolishly placed, behind a radiator where no accidental connection could be made. Which means it wasn’t Lass the killers wanted.”

“It was Will,” Zeller finished for him, voice cold, “Oh shit, *shit!”* Zeller cursed, feeling like an idiot, “Lass. Miriam Lass,” he pulled out his phone and pulled up the notes Will had showed him about the Amanuensis, *G-R to L-A,* shoving it into Jimmy’s hands, “and Graham. L and G. The Aman had information on all of them. It all fits!”

Reading steadily, Jimmy looked stoic, “This isn’t good,” he said, monotone, eyes hard, “not at all.”

“Jesus Christ, *fuck* . No one's been able to reach him all morning, not since last night! We...” it was the last thing he wanted to do, considering, but he felt they had no other choice, “we have to tell Jack...”

The phone ringing in his pocket was fished out as he rushed into the hallway, fumbled up by an eager hand as he ran. Stress made his footsteps loud and fast.

“Zeller,” he answered strictly.

“Mr. Zeller,” the voice on the other end threw him, *not sure who it was* ; frowning as he hopped in the elevator and pushed for the 4th floor Brian pulled the phone from his ear and froze. The caller ID was Will Graham. He blinked, swallowed, and then put the phone back to his ear, “who is this?”

“I’m offended you do not remember me.”

“Is that..?” he tapped his fingers on the wall of the elevator and tried hard, really hard, and then... “Lecter. Dr. Lecter?”

“Ah, not too offended then.”

“Look, not that this isn’t nice,” he said acidly, “but have you seen Will? No one can get a hold of him and I think he might be in danger...wait,” he shook his head, realising his mouth was running away from his brain, “why are you calling from his phone?”

A pause in which a sigh ran through the silence like a train through a tunnel, "Mr. Zeller I chose to call you because I feel you were perhaps closest to Will in your workplace, am I correct?”

“What the *hell* is going on here?” Zeller knew he sounded angry but was unable to quell it.

“Please answer my question. It is important.”

“He’s my friend if that’s what you want to know,” he said strictly.

“Good. Thank you. Then I need your help.”

“ *You* need my help? I don’t even know what the fuck is going on, and I don’t know where Will is..!”

“If I were to tell you someone has taken him, and that I do not wish to let Jack Crawford know about it,” as the words fed through the phone Brian found himself slowly standing up straight, lump forming in his throat, “would you still help me?”

Heart thumping in his chest, Brian Zeller watched the doors ping open on the fourth floor, revealing the long, open corridor with Jack Crawford’s office at the end, facing him like a goal. He felt his mouth twitch, his tongue come out to wet his lips, *nearly stepped out onto the carpet but then...*

“Give me one reason why I should.”

“I can do better than that. I can give you two. For one, Jack Crawford is working with the Registry behind the curtains of this case to its detriment,” the voice told him; Zeller blanched, but found that he didn’t instantly disbelieve it. *Crawford had been acting strange since day one with this case* , “and two,” the voice changed, less staid, less practiced, and suddenly too sincere to ignore the implications of, “as you are now probably quite aware, Will Graham is anything but ordinary. He is something more than anyone could imagine. If you continue to work with Jack Crawford you risk him being incarcerated, or worse.”

“Are you fucking joking?” Zeller said, unable to keep the words internal.

“I would not joke about such a thing. Will is very dear to me. I want him safe. Please, Mr. Zeller, I am asking for your help.”

One thump, *the fucking Registry, he’d hated them since he was a boy,* two thumps, *the reason his sister had always been hidden away, he barely saw her sometimes,* three thumps of his heart, *the thought of Will Graham ending up in that terrifying place was sickening* ...and then he reached out to hit the button for the ground floor.

Stress made his footsteps loud and fast...and fear made him clumsy enough to agree to things he normally wouldn’t have trusted for a hot minute.

“You promised me that no one would get hurt this time.”

Jack Crawford found himself feeling a disgusting sense of déjà vu sneaking up his spine. It was unpleasant and chilling, much like the man he was currently conversing with on the phone. Hopkins had never been socially adept, which the Registry seemed to value as a quality for top brass candidates, but even Jack could tell when the man was lying. Sitting in his office, able to see all the hard working men and women around him, made him feel like even more of a fraud than he already considered himself.

“I told you that no one would be harmed by ourselves,” Hopkins clarified, “I’m afraid I can not vouch for the Unnaturals who are currently perpetrating these killings in Baltimore.”

“We never released any press about the killers being Unnaturals,” Crawford retorted, angry and suspicious.

“I think it’s fair to say it’s an educated guess.”

“Well I don’t appreciate whoever taught you how to work as a team, because you’re keeping everything on your side of the damn table!”

“Harsh words from a man who is currently insulting me.”

“Hash words?” Jack laughed uncivilly, “From the man who blackmailed me into cooperating in the first place. What was it again? Zeller’s half sister? Will Graham’s freedom? Don’t play the saint, I don’t like the taste of bile in my throat. Things are getting out of hand over here, and this Ripper case has gone on *long* enough. I want you to back off, from this case, from my department, and from *my team* , understand?”

Silence. Jack sat back in his chair and put his hand to his mouth, rubbing worriedly; eventually Hopkins spoke, “I do hope you haven’t been regretting our collaboration.”

“I think our collaboration was built on sand instead of stone,” Jack said, eyes flicking to the manilla folder Freddie Lounds had handed him, “all that shit you told me about Graham. About who, or *what* he is. It was bullshit, wasn’t it. I got intel from a reliable source, someone who isn’t invested in lying about what she finds, and she gave me proof that Will’s just the same as the rest of us. Nothing special. Nothing strange. Just another witch with a sad past, dime a dozen. You *used* me, *used* Will to get close to this investigation so you could get your hands on whatever it is you people like to get your hands on, right? Things that us mere mortals aren't supposed to even know exists, or some such shit. Well I’m putting my damn foot down. Back off.”

Another pause, and then the last thing he wanted to hear. A laugh, slow and steady, “Jack. I can call you Jack? It does seem you’ve been fed some interesting lies by someone who surely is more invested in protecting her own skin than being impartial. Let me guess, Fredericka Lounds?”

Jack felt cold, suddenly cold and still, “Have you been following me?”

“No need. I’ve been following Freddie, because she does adhoc work for us. I like to keep close tabs on my contacts. Did you know that recently she did some freelance work for Dr. Hannibal Lecter?”

“Dr. Lecter?” Jack felt thrown, “What has he got to do with this?”

“He’s, shall we say, very invested in Will. More than most psychiatrists would be in a patient. I do believe he commissioned Miss Lounds to deliver that incorrect information on Will Graham to you. I had hoped not to bring our troubles with him to light, but perhaps this is something you should look into on your own time, hmm? Until then, I look forward to hearing from you for updates on the case...” Hopkins stopped talking and there were some muffled sounds from the other end of the phone, urgent and whispered, “...if you will excuse me Agent Crawford, I’m needed.”

The line went dead. Jack was left staring at the wall, breathing deep and slow. When he put his phone down on the table he hesitated only a minute before checking once more if anyone had been able to reach Graham. On finding out that he still wasn’t answering his phone Jack snapped at the tech on the line to ‘ *damn well trace his phone and get back to me ASAP!’*

Thoughts of Miriam Lass circled in his mind like a carnival horror show.

“Not again,” he said to himself, dialling for the second floor, “not ever again,” the line connected, “Janet, that you? Yeah, Jack, hey. Look, I know you’re probably up to your eyeballs in work like always huh? Yeah,” he laughed as confidently as he could, “aren’t we all. Look, I know it’s a lot to

ask but could you do me a huge favour when you've got the time? I need a background check, the full works. Yeah, checking for anomalies, falsification of documents, that sort of thing. Lecter. Doctor Hannibal Lecter. Sure. You're a star," he said, eyes hard, "thanks a million."

Quiet. Very dark, and very quiet. He knew he'd passed out but down here, *in the earth's bowels*, it was difficult to know for how long. Touching his chest felt wet and he could smell blood. Feel the light-headedness that came with blood loss. Knew that he was dying, whether it be of his injuries or suffocation; *whichever came first.*

The air felt deadened, only vibrating with the sounds of his own breath and the small involuntary and incoherent noises that spouted from his throat sporadically. Confined to this tiny space, his world had shrunk down to almost nothing. No way to know how long it had been since he'd become part of the dirt and dust. Nothing but a slow, tired death in a place where he would never be found. Alone, completely alone except for his demons.

Terrifying. Cold. Small. *He felt small and alone.*

It was quiet. Quiet and dark. Will Graham forced himself not to give in to the hysteria and break down, because crying would only use up the air faster.

You really think that matters now? Think someone will find you , he thought to himself hollowly, *don't you.* He couldn't answer, because it would be too final. Instead he started trying his best to be practical. Taking as long a calming breath as he dared, he took his bound hands and once more began searching for anything she might have left on him. It was difficult in the confined space, *both because movement was constricted and because the movement being constricted was causing him to panic* , but he did his best.

Pockets empty except for something that felt like a receipt, and in the other his wallet. It was painful to reach his jean's pockets, broken rib grinding and screaming at him, and all he found was his temp ID in one, *he could tell by the laminated feel*, and some pocket change in the other. The inner pockets of his jacket were full of bits and pieces of paraphernalia, *deer felt, symbols, eagle feather,* but none of it was any use without the ability to cast a spell, and the wards tying him tight stopped any hope of that.

Trying to remove the gag at his mouth was futile, his fingertips unable to get a grip on the material like he was trying to find the start of a roll of Sellotape. Swallowing thickly as he tried not to let the panic resurface, Will guessed that was the whole point.

DONT BE SAD , the voice he was trying to ignore encouraged him, **EVERYTHING WILL BE BACK WHERE IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE VERY SOON.**

I'm...I'm scared. I don't want to fucking die like this. Oh Jesus Christ please, someone please! Giving in, Will heard himself screaming, muffled and pleading and raw, over and over. *Please help me! Please!* The muted, grating sound was almost deafening in comparison to the quiet, filling the coffin like water for him to drown in. *Please someone, find me, please!*

*They'll be looking for me. Hannibal will have told them, reported the assault and...*his screams cut out, swift as a bird. Will stalled, hiccoughing on the panic stuck in his throat. *Wait*, he thought, trying his best to reason through the madness, *wait.*

That morning. *Had it truly only been that morning since his dream? It felt like an age.* His horrible dream. *The nightmare.* Not that he was a stranger to nightmares, but this one had been different. Lucid, vivid and specific in its content.

And different because he hadn't been alone. *Once again someone had looked back at him from the other side.* Forcing his breathing to calm, his chest to stop spasming with each breath, Will closed his eyes even though it was just as dark with them open. Taking another long breath, he let it out and tried to concentrate.

Hannibal Lecter had seen him. Truly seen him. Across the odd and forbidden landscape of his dream they had looked at each other like deer in the headlights. Seen one another. They were connected, even if he wasn't sure quite why or how, they were connected and that was something.

You can't trust him , his conscience demanded, *he's a liar and he's involved in this far deeper than he would admit and you don't even know what he is, truly is. Your instincts told you not to trust him for a reason. He's dangerous, and he might just be using you to get what he wants.*

True. It was all true. Lecter was dangerous, he'd known that the moment he laid eyes on the man and yet he'd let their connection grow. Allowed the man closer than any other had ever reached. *There was a connection there that stabbed deep.* Despite his attacker's visions of and feelings about Lecter, visceral and vivid and true as they were, Will didn't have a choice. This was the only hope he had.

Breathe in, breathe out. He felt a jolt of hope, and moments later a pitting sickness in his gut for even having it. *You're going to die here* , part of him said cruelly, *why even fight it?*

Because there's always a chance , he wanted to say. He looked slowly to his right, seeing the face of Miriam Lass laying there next to him. Wondering sorrowfully if this was how she'd felt, trapped and cut open and cursed in that miserable warehouse, pleading and hoping beyond hope that someone would come and save her before it was too late.

I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry , he wanted to say. Only he couldn't; *mouth gagged shut with grief and curses.*

Instead, he lay on his back and placed his hands on his chest. *This would work* , he said to himself again and again and again, *this would work and they would find him and he would be ok* . As he tried his best to relax, Will felt his fingers curling tighter and tighter into the fabric of his jacket.

If you go to sleep now...chances are you'll never wake up again. For a moment he didn't breathe at all, allowing the thought to seep in, to permeate from his brain through his limbs to his extremities.

Quiet. And dark. Placing his shaking hands against the silk lining of the coffin lid above him, Will Graham took one last deep breath and tried his best to fall asleep.

"Will one of you *shut him the hell up!"*

Screaming. He'd always hated people screaming. Grating and crying, like a baby wailing. He always felt guilty when people cried, when people screamed. Something he never had gotten the hang of. Now, as they hobbled and dragged themselves into the house, Chilton felt the culpability biting at him as Tobias Budge appeared in the bedroom doorway and stared wide-eyed at the mess in the atrium.

“Oh my god,” Budge said, hurrying forward, “what *happened?!”*

To be fair, Chilton thought, Buddish didn’t look good. The tourniquet Stammets had tied had done its job, but he was still bleeding from the stump that was all that was left of his left leg below the knee. Watching Budge help Stammets carry the screaming man through to the kitchen where they placed him carefully on the counter, Chilton could do nothing but stare.

“It hurts, it fucking *hurts!"* Buddish was screaming, "Get me something, please get me something, I need something-*aaahhh* !”

“Painkillers, we’ve got morphine,” Budge was saying as he held Buddish’s flailing hands.

“Morphine doesn’t work on Weres,” Stammets, ever the pharmacist, was clinical in the face of medical emergencies, “but we need to stop the bleeding. Tobias, before working with us you ran with a witch cult, right?”

“Right,” Budge looked angry and cagey all at once, “what the hell has that got to do with anything!”

“You know the basics of fiend fire?”

“I...I do.”

“We’ll need it to cauterize the wound. It’s all we can do to save his life.”

Watching this happen was like watching a play at the theatre. *The only way to keep himself removed from the horror and the disaster of it all* . When the door to the kitchen closed, snapping his view of Buddish wailing and screaming shut behind the nice pine doorway, it was like a switch being flipped. Chilton looked to his right suddenly, seeing Tobias there, pale and shaken. It was then that Frederick remembered the girl he was still holding in front of him by the shoulders.

Abigail Hobbs had been quiet since they had fled, eyes downcast to the floor. Chilton stared at the back of her head and knew that Tobias was speaking to him, trying to ask him something, but all he could see was the back of her head, that fall of dark hair. For a swift moment he thought of killing her, *imagined ripping her head from her body and watching the fountain of blood erupt to the ceiling.* It passed with a *breath in, breath out* , and then he blinked. Letting go of her, she seemed to tremble. Next he knew, Tobias had a hold of his arm, shaking him.

“What *happened!”*

“Du Maurier,” he said, voice toneless, “she was there. She...I was told she killed the Aman. When I confronted her she attacked us. It was...messy.”

“...You’re serious,” Budge looked shocked, *too much information too quickly making the younger man shudder in a breath* , “fucking hell. What are...wait where is Clark?” Budge asked, eyes on the swivel.

“Don’t speak that name to me,” Chilton snarled, “that miserable, conniving little pissant chose her over us.”

“That fucker,” Budge hissed, eyes narrowed; when he opened his mouth to say something else it was silenced by more screaming from *behind the pine door* . They both stood and stared.

“You’d better help,” Chilton said, once more hollow, “I’ll take care of the girl. And Eva. We must get Eva back here at once. We have to find Du Maurier before she ruins *everything* .”

“But this is all her design,” Budge was furious and confused, gesturing widely, “all of this! Why is she doing this to us? What does she want?”

“What do any of them *want* ,” Chilton said snidely, “we’re all just pawns in some sick game. Some miserable game. The girl,” Chilton said suddenly, gesturing to Abigail, “I'll make sure she’s watched. Actually, we should tie her up. Secure her. I don’t fucking trust her.”

When Abigail Hobbs' scared eyes looked up at his, Chilton wished he had the courage of his conviction. *Wished he could kill her here and now* . Instead, he let her plead like a bleeding heart.

“Wait. Please wait, I can help. I’m sorry, I really am, about your friend,” Abigail was babbling.

“Don’t start this shit again, I don’t care about you apologies,” Chilton spat, teeth bared as he leaned in at her, making her recoil, “you miserable little bitch! Who gave you the message? It was Lecter wasn’t it! *Answer me!”*

Crying, she was crying, and he wished he could kill her to make it stop. Wished her young, terrified face didn’t affect him so.

“I can help,” she was sobbing, “with the fire. I can cast. Please, let me help. I’m sorry! I didn’t know!”

“Fred,” Budge was touching his face, turning Chilton’s head to look at him, “let me take care of this.”

“Tobias...”

“Let me,” he leaned in and placed a soft kiss to his lips; Chilton was amazed how calming the simple motion was. Taking a breath, he nodded once, twice, and let Budge take the sobbing girl by the arm and march her back through *the pine door* with its terrible, terrible screaming.

At the last hurdle, everything had come crashing down around them; a house made of matchsticks, and someone had struck a fire. His world was going up in flaring bursts of sulphur, leaving a terrible smell. *From under the pine door he could hear it, the smell of fire and the sounds of screaming* . Du Maurier had used them, bent them to her will, and now she was ready to burn everything to the ground in order to surely get back at one man.

Lecter.

The man they all mutually detested. The common ground of enmity that had held Chilton fast in pursuit of their goal, along with the promise of humanity dangled before him like a carrot before a donkey. Now, he wasn’t sure if any of it had been real. If all along he’d been nothing but a puppet like the rest of them, caught up in some greater struggle of power and revenge that cared nothing for the likes of him or his colleagues.

By the time Eva arrived, Buddish was unconscious but at least still alive. She found them sitting in the living room, silent with words left unsaid rather than nothing to say. As she was brought up to speed by Stammets, Chilton sat and stared at Abigail Hobbs as Tobias cleaned the blood drops from his face with a warm cloth. Once she had helped save Buddish, Tobias had tied her to dining chair

with a series of complicated knots. She looked frightened, and Chilton appreciated that if nothing else.

“What are we going to do?” Eva was asking in a hushed voice, “I mean, what are...what can we..?”

“We need to find Will Graham,” Chilton said, pulling all eyes to him; lifting his head he held up his hand, stopping Budge’s attentions, “Du Maurier...she wouldn’t have been so drastic if she didn’t already have a plan. She wasn’t searching anymore, she knew Graham was the one we needed. I shouldn’t have been so fucking pedantic, I should have had him captured before any of this...”

“It’s not your fault,” Budge said; the cloth slid against his throat and Chilton swallowed, allowing the comfort, “they did this to all of us.”

“You think we can still go through with the ritual?” Stammets asked, incredulous, “but Du Maurier was the one who told us, who taught us. Everything that woman said might be a lie!”

“But there is one who may know the truth,” Chilton said darkly, “one who probably knows the truth behind all of this.”

“Wait...” Stammets looked scared.

“Tobias,” Chilton said, looking to the man, “Lecter does not yet know who you are,” reaching up to cup his cheek, he ran his thumb over a full bottom lip and watched Tobias try and look brave in the face of what he was asking, “there may still be a chance to salvage this.”

As his eyes once more returned to Abigail, all others in the room followed his gaze as the pale girl wept silently and hung her head, tears dripping from her chin.

“Shit, you’re injured. We need to...”

“No time. I will be fine.”

For a whole fifteen minute drive to the agreed meeting point, Brian Zeller had tried to convince himself to turn around, go back to Quantico and tell Jack Crawford everything he suspected. Tell him about Will, and about Lecter. But at every turn, every junction, every *chance to do it* , he’d thought of the Registry and the inquiry there would surely be and...he’d kept his foot on the gas. By the time he’d reached the address Lecter had sent to him he was still split almost fifty-fifty over his need to rebel.

And then he’d seen the car. Parking haphazardly by the side of the road he’d rushed towards the upturned vehicle, runnels rent through the metal, torn and broken and being utterly and completely ignored by the passers by. It was as if the drastic car accident was only visible to himself and the man that had summoned him there.

Sitting on the verge Lecter looked bloodied but calm. Which had led to Brian trying to convince him to get to hospital, because clearly *car crash* and clearly *injuries* and clearly *Will was fucking missing.*

“We were attacked,” Lecter told him as Zeller helped him stand.

“Who by? Do you know?”

"No. But they were after Graham."

“Yeah,” Zeller said grimly as he helped Lecter into his car, “and I think I know why.”

It was almost calming talking to Lecter, outlining his hypothesis of the Seals and Miriam and everything he’d discovered. It made sense, somehow, convinced Brian that what he was doing was the right thing. Zeller was maybe beginning to understood why Will seemed to like hanging out with the guy so much when Will clearly didn’t enjoy having the inside of his head looked at too closely. Lecter was a good listener.

“It is a sound theory,” Lecter nodded.

“And I wish I was wrong,” Zeller said, driving back towards the road, “can you tell me where the hell we’re going?”

“I saw a registration, of the car he was abducted in,” Lecter said, “5CL Z83.”

Zeller called it in. It came back stolen.

“ *Fuck* ,” he muttered, “Can’t you give me anything Tony?”

“Sorry Zeller, I can give you the owner’s address?” Tony from dispatch said, trying his best, “Maybe he can help you?”

“I don’t have time for...” Zeller started angrily, but stalled as Lecter looked to him, nodding once; narrowing his eyes Brian spoke slowly, “actually, yeah, give me that address.”

“Sure thing,” Tony said.

If you were to ask him why he’d done it, any of it, *from keeping quiet to doing everything Lecter asked him to do,* he probably couldn’t have given you a reasonable answer. At the time it had seemed completely normal, following the instruction of a civilian to pursue a kidnapped colleague without informing any of his superiors or following any sort of protocol.

As they approached the address Tony had given them, Zeller finally managed to think past the haze of acceptance and grab at the question that was niggling at him. Pulling up the handbrake, he looked at the man in the passenger seat, still as calm and collected as if they were going to pick up groceries.

He bypassed asking how the man knew, and instead went straight for the jugular, “Why is Crawford working with the Registry?”

Lecter stared out of the windscreen before sniffing, his mouth twitching with the action. When he turned his head to look at Zeller, the man couldn’t help but feel somehow stupid for asking.

“I believe Miss Katz has already informed you of Will’s rather spectacular episode at the cemetery.”

“She said something about it, yeah,” Brian mumbled.

“Will Graham is no simple backwoods witch,” Lecter said, “and the Registry have known this for a long time.”

“Care to explain how *you* know that?”

A smile was his reply, slow and unsettling. Brian swallowed, feeling out of his depth.

“Mr. Zeller, Will trusts you. It is the reason I called yourself and no one else to help with this.”

“And why should I trust you?”

“You shouldn’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Brian said, frowning worriedly.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Lecter said as he opened the door on his side and left the car.

Brian felt a cold chill creeping across his skin as he watched Lecter walk towards the front door of the unassuming suburban house. *Fucking shit,* was all he could think, *this is insane. You’re insane for doing this. Why are you doing this, huh?* And yet as he watched Lecter knock at the door he already knew what he was going to do. He already knew that he’d made his choice and he would stick with it no matter what. When Lecter tried the door and found it open Brian couldn’t stop himself from hurrying out of the car and after the figure of Lecter as he entered the house.

Alana parked and tried not to rush, not to be too obvious in hurrying, because it would be like admitting it to herself; *she didn’t want to see Will, not yet.* She didn’t want to tell the truth, and that’s what would happen if she saw him. She would have to tell the truth.

So perhaps it was easier, coming here. Perhaps it was simpler speaking to someone neutral. Perhaps it would be easier to speak to Jack Crawford about this. Or it would have been if he wasn’t currently shouting like a pissed off drill sergeant at Beverly Katz and Jimmy Price in the small meeting room she’d been directed to by a helpful passer-by.

“ *Gone!?* Both of them now? I’m sorry, I thought I was heading up a crack team of special agents, not a damn kindergarten!”

“Look, I’m not responsible for them twenty-four-seven!” Katz was giving as good as she got, but looked miserable and guilty regardless.

“Jack, I think this is more serious than we first imagined,” Price was trying to get someone to listen to him, looking desperate.

“You don’t fucking say, Price!”

Clearing her throat, Alana knocked on the door and felt startled when three sets of eyes turned on her in unison. She simply stood and waited for Jack to usher her out of the room, leading her agitatedly to his office.

“You’re going to have to keep this short, Alana,” Jack was saying as he typed on his computer, face stony, “we’re having a bit of a situation here.”

“Zeller told me you haven’t heard from Will?” Alana asked cautiously.

“And now Zeller has also decided to play hooky,” Jack said tightly, “so if you wouldn’t mind cutting to the chase? I’m kind of busy here.”

When she stayed quiet it forced Jack to look at her, and on seeing her face he stopped what he was doing. They stared at each other until Jack eventually licked his lips and closed the lid of his laptop. Alana watched him seriously, “I spoke to one of my colleagues in Philly yesterday, at the field office.”

“Oh?”

“About Will’s mother.”

“Mother?” Jack sent her a warning stare, “Why the hell would you..?”

“And this morning I spoke to Hannah Robicheaux.”

“Alana...”

“And I want to know, Jack. I want to know if you already knew, if you were hiding this from him, if you’re just as involved as I’m sure the Registry is in Will’s life...or if you’re like the rest of us. Just as helpless as the rest of us.”

Crawford rubbed a hand over his mouth, seeming to deliberate, before lifting his hand and offering her the chair on the other side of his desk. She declined, finding it easier to stay angry if she was standing. Jack didn’t watch her as she spoke, just listened. She appreciated that if nothing else.

“Will was given an envelope recently, with pictures and files relating to him. More specifically to his family. His mother. There were photographs, police reports. He asked if I would look into it for him. So I did. I wish I hadn’t but...I did.”

“And how do you know you can believe anything that Robicheaux tells you?” Jack tried to argue pathetically.

“She told me the truth,” Alana said, making Jack sigh, “I know she did. Do you want to hear it or not?”

Jack nodded slowly, as if he wasn’t sure himself. Alana took a long, deep breath and let it out slow before she began. As she talked she kept her voice neutral, lecture-like. It helped her cope.

“He name was Hannah Graham. She lived in New Orleans, had her whole life. She was a witch in a full coven along with Hannah Robicheaux. They were friends, good friends. When Graham got pregnant, Robicheaux said the woman was delighted. She had a boyfriend, and they were planning on running away together.”

“So when she went missing from her coven, six months pregnant, many didn’t think her disapperance was suspicious. No one knew where she went, not her coven, not the police. They dismissed Robicheaux’s fears that she'd been kidnapped by saying that Graham had probably run off with the boyfriend, because they also couldn’t find any sign of him,” Alana sighed, feeling sick, “but between what I was able to find out about the case, and what Robicheaux told me, it seems more likely that she was kidnapped for a very specific reason.”

Jack was unexpectedly staid and quiet as Alana spoke. She didn’t like it. It smacked of Jack not being as surprised by her words as she’d expected him to be.

“Robicheaux told me that she reappeared suddenly at the coven one night, looking like hell. Haggard and traumatised. The coven took her back in, and when they were able to get any sense out of her all she would tell them, over and over, was that the baby was no longer human,” she swallowed heavily, feeling odd and slightly ill at the explanation, “and that...that to save her they were going to perform a rite to cleanse the child when it was born.”

“Cleanse?” Jack asked, frowning.

“...Purify the spirit,” she said, finality in her tone.

Jack blanched, looking away, “They were going to *kill* the baby? Jesus! Why?”

“They thought it wasn’t a child any longer. Something had been done to the foetus. Robicheaux wasn’t sure what and Graham wouldn’t tell them what had happened, but they believed her. Robicheaux said that her and some of the others were unhappy with the solution, but that the Elder insisted upon it. They...I mean she gave birth and...” taking a breath Alana finally sat down, clasping her hands together, “...they were going to use a water purification rite. Drown the child in a bath.”

“Holy shit,” Crawford rubbed at his face, eyes hollow and horrified; for a moment there was nothing but silence. When Crawford finally blinked, focusing back on Alana as if dragging himself back from the brink, he asked one question that Alana wished he hadn’t, “why didn’t they?”

Wetting her lips Alana puffed out a breath and tapped her fingers together, clearing her throat, “There was...something attacked her. Them, I mean. Something attacked them and killed Hannah Graham, scattered the sisters. Robicheaux told me everyone was screaming and running, there was blood everywhere. It...whatever it was, it was angry, desperate. It tore Graham in half.”

Jack was frowning, staring at the floor as if desperately trying not to see it, *visualise it* .

“Robicheaux told me that she thought it came to save the baby, Jack,” Alana said, hating the words as she spoke them, “it came to rescue the child. She said that she was the only one that didn’t run. She was so scared she couldn’t run, just had to watch her friend murdered. She said *it* gave her the child and told her to care for it. And that it was...it was sorry for what had happened.”

“Who? Did she know who attacked her?”

“She couldn’t tell me.”

“I’ll get them to bring her in,” Jack said, shocked and furious, “she has no right to keep this shit to herself..!”

“No Jack, you don’t understand, she couldn’t. Whatever it was,” Alana said, staring at him pointedly, “it wouldn’t let her tell me. She *couldn’t* , Jack.”

“Shit. *Shit* , this is...” Jack sighed roughly, stressed; when he pummelled his desk with a heavy hand it shook everything atop it, making Alana start badly, hand to her mouth.

“Did you know?” she asked, clearing her throat as her voice was reedy with fright, “ *Did* you?”

“No,” Jack said, and she believed him, “not...not the particulars. I just...” he shook his head, “I knew there was a file on him. On Will. At the Registry.”

“A file?” Alana looked alarmed, “What does it say?”

“I don’t have clearance.”

“You don’t? That can’t be right.”

“Alana, did you listen to the story you just told me?” Jack said harshly, “There’s something wrong with him, do you understand that? Will isn’t who we think he is.”

“Is that what they told you?” Alana asked, outrage obvious in her tone, “Is that the reason that the Registry gave in order to make it *easier* for you to what? Get information on him? Hand him over when the time is right?”

“You think you know what you’re talking about, but you don’t,” Jack said stonily.

“I wish I didn’t, Jack,” she said, standing; a moment’s hesitation and then she sighed, “I want to help you find Will. I want to make sure he's ok. I’m usually pretty good at guessing where he’s gone when he hides himself away.”

“Well, that’s all well and good but we’re not so sure that he’s hiding.”

Startled, Alana looked up sharply at Jack’s tired, desperate face, “What..? What are you talking about?”

“Let me show you what we have so far,” Jack said, standing to lead her back towards the meeting room where she could see Jimmy drawing agitatedly on a white board and Katz typing furiously at a computer, “and maybe we can find him before anyone starts sending us limbs.”

The words left her cold. Alana gripped her bag strap tightly in both hands before hurrying inside and closing the door behind her.

“I knew you’d find me,” she said softly, eyes bright, almost feverish.

“I always do,” he said, nodding.

The house was unassuming and rather banal. Black leather furniture, cream paint, bland decoration. If it hadn’t been for the spectacular sprays of thick, arterial blood dancing across the carpet and up the walls the place would have been utterly inconsequential.

Amongst it all, Bedelia Du Maurier sat looking like the crazed cat with the cream. All around her were the remnants of a man, or what had been once. *He suspected the man whose car she had stolen*. As they locked eyes Hannibal knew he looked brutal, savage; no need for pretences here, not with her. They had known each other long enough for Bedelia to know that this would only end one way. He flexed his fingers again, feeling the claws come out.

“Where is he?” he asked as she sat and licked her bloody hands like a demented child, staring at her with everything he could muster, “ **Where is Will Graham?** ”

Belladonna

Chapter Notes

> I just wanted to say thanks so much for all the support of this story, it's really wild reading all the comments and seeing how much people are enjoying it! 🙏

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The smell. That was probably the worst aspect for a human, he imagined. It was difficult to remember such a thing, being appalled by blood. The iron stink of mortality had become commonplace, enough that it was odd in this instance to be reminded of its taboo nature. As Hannibal Lecter stared at Brian Zeller, standing horrified with his gun raised in the doorway, it was as if he was being forced to *spot the difference* .

It had been a long lifetime since he could have considered himself a fine example of humanity, and right now part of himself that he couldn't quite name considered this salt in the wound.

"**I want you to leave, Mr. Zeller** ," Lecter ordered the shell-shocked agent, " **Go back to the car and stay there. Right now** ."

It was testament to his skill that the man did so, despite Hannibal's distracting anger and despite the vision before them both. *Not just the blood, not just the gore, but also the vision of Bedelia Du Maurier unmasked and showing her plumage.* Without her glamour the woman's ebony skin shone in the artificial light and only highlighted her nothing-left-to-lose attitude to this farcical affair.

As Zeller holstered his weapon, face placid while he returned to his car as instructed, Hannibal waited until the man was out of sight before relinquishing his hold on his own glamour. Felt as the *human suit* melted away, revealing the truth that lay beneath it. *The cursed darkness that bloomed* . In his peripheral vision he observed his shadow against the wall, saw the roots growing like antlers from his skull, the claws elongate, heard the *crack* and the *rip* .

A long breath in, held, and then let out slowly. Lecter took a moment to himself. *Took stock of his mistakes* . It was never pleasant work, but sometimes necessary.

One hundred and twenty-three years ago. Yes, it had been eighteen-ninety-eight...or ninety-nine? No, ninety-eight. He remembered because the figure skating championships had come to London.

He had taken Bedelia to meet Herr Grenander backstage as he did warm-ups. It had snowed and each flake had stuck to her hair and her dress and her shawl like little frosty pearls. In her heavy finery she had still been elegant and light of foot, flirting with him even under the ever watchful eye of their chaperone. He had enjoyed watching her talk shop with the skaters like only a dancer could. And she had been so starstruck by his influence and his easy ability to mould the world around him into whatever he wanted it to be, a glimpse of a freedom her ambitious soul desired more than anything, that in the end it had been simple to make Bedelia Du Maurier his.

And he was right in his choice. Or at least that was what he believed. Because he was always right, wasn't he? *Perhaps any creature that had existed upon this earth as long as he had became conceited enough to believe themselves infallible.* Only now, perhaps ironically since Will Graham had become part of his existence, was he able to see the mistake he had made with Bedelia.

He thought he perhaps remembered promising her. *What had it been? Prolonged life? Everlasting beauty? Power and influence?* Perhaps it had been all of it and none of it. *All ideals he had expected her to covet.* Bedelia had captivated him; she had been perfect, he knew as soon as he smelled her lily white skin and pulled the perfume of the forest from the air. She had all the hallmarks necessary to slot seamlessly into his research, *the endless pages in his mind that he carried with him from country to country, learning all that he could from academics and practitioners and priests and cultists, whether given voluntarily or tortured from unwilling tongues, anyone and anything he thought might be able to add just one more piece to the puzzle.*

At one time he had thought she might be the last piece, slotting into place with blinding satisfaction, *just like he did every time he thought he had the answer* . It was beginning to become difficult to remember all of their faces now, those that he had found with the smell of *forest magic* effusing from their body like a siren's song. *Like a memory of his sister calling to him through time* . Centuries apart, and yet they all held the same key.

Now, standing together in this wretched little house with nothing but bad memories and bad blood between them, Hannibal knew the truth. Knew the reason he should never have allowed Bedelia Du Maurier to remain intact and anchored to him like a chain, become a moon to his earth, ever circling, ever held in place by the gravitational pull.

She had never forgiven him because she could not, and he had never expected her forgiveness because he could not understand the full depth of his transgression. To him her constant attempts to end his life had become amusing rather than concerning, like a tradition trotted out to entertain rather than anything to be taken seriously. *Made him feel something, at least, in a life numbed by the never ending passage of days and months and years which had slowly but surely eroded all connection to his life, his own time, his humanity, to people at all.*

But now it seemed Bedelia had finally decided to take her revenge seriously, and Lecter knew it because she was no longer trying to kill *him* . She was trying to kill his dream. His reason for living. She had stolen the very last piece of the puzzle and appeared to be planning to burn centuries of effort before his eyes.

"I see it has finally come to this," he said as he watched her stand up.

That she rolled her eyes and laughed only made him loathe her all the more. Her flippancy had never been one of her more charming traits. "Oh, don't be so *dramatic!"* Bedelia said, waving her hand sharply through the air, "You always were one to lean into the theatrics. *Et tu, et tu* ," she snorted, "as if what I'm doing is some big fucking surprise."

"Bedelia, I asked you once, I will not ask again..."

"Come now, Hannibal, I've known you for a long time. I *know* that your attachments are fleeting and your interest is almost impossible to keep a hold of but *I* managed it. *I* never got old, did I. I think *I* have the best chance of understanding that this time, after all your years searching for a solution to your problem..." she smiled but it was black, devoid of feeling, " *this* time it was going to work, wasn't it?"

“I do not appreciate your use of the past tense,” Lecter said coldly.

“Oh you don’t, do you?” she mocked, “Well, I don’t appreciate you trying to have me murdered you utter *shit!”*

“I did not specifically intend for you and Chilton to murder each other.”

“But you didn’t exactly care if that was the outcome or not,” she said sourly, “that about right?”

“Paraphrased,” he said, sniffing, “but not wrong.”

“You fucking *cunt!* Couldn’t even put enough effort into having me offed, could you! Lazy sack of shit, too much like hard work!”

“Bedelia, darling,” Hannibal sighed, eyes hard as stone even as his tone was bored and tired and *irritated* , “that would have required me to care about the outcome of your life, which I do not. Have not for some time. Perhaps we can sort this mess by you giving me what I want, and me giving you what you want. Dead, alive, I no longer care, I simply want you to remove yourself from my sphere of knowledge altogether. In truth it seems it would do us both a kindness. If I can do this by compromising, I will happily oblige.”

Her smile was cruel but deprecating, her eyes swimming with tears thick like oil; when she spoke her words were warbled by grief and anger, “Give me what I want? *You* ?” she pointed mockingly, “You can’t give me what I want, *no one* can give me that, not now. Not since you gifted me the world only to take it all away, strip me of my life! I want my *child* ! I want him returned to me alive,” she spat, tone blacker than tar, “I want my baby, you fucking horror show. I want you to love me! I want us! I want my *life back* !”

Hannibal sighed. No matter how much he’d pretended, no matter how much he had played into this sham of a life they had together, nothing had ever been the same since the baby.

So small. Small and fragile. He had taken it from the room because Bedelia said she couldn’t bear to be near it, wanted it gone. Hannibal had obliged because she was hysterical and in such a state he couldn’t deal with her. Her grief pitched about like a ship in a storm, from mania to eerie quiet. His own disappointment that the ritual had not worked was already too much for him to bear.

He had expected...expected her to appear. Expected his sister to be reborn that night. Now all he was left with was a tiny body to dispose of.

Even as he had wrapped its odd little corpse in swaddling cloth and set out for the river, he was intrigued by the thought of being attached. He should be, shouldn’t he? Their child, after all. His child. Looking down at the closed eyes and tiny features of the pitch-coloured infant all he could think about were the obvious flaws in his research: it had led him to believe that the child must be born an Unnatural for the Rite to work, and thus both parents must also be Unnaturals with the gift of the forest. However, it appeared that this had only ended in failure: a stillbirth.

And there was nothing more than that. No tenderness, no connection, no devotion for the cold child in his arms as he laid it into the black night time waters and watched it sink. In that moment, chill in the damp on the slimy steps under the moonlight, he had come face to face with an odd and disconcerting thought.

When he got her back, when he finally brought her back...would he even be capable of loving her?

Things hadn't been the same since then, for either of them. Bedelia in realising she had been nothing but a receptacle for the child he had been trying his whole life to resurrect. And him in the realisation of his own inadequacies. That in dealing with Bedelia he had been forced to admit that he no longer had the capacity to care...and there in lay the rub.

Lifting his head Hannibal felt his lip twitch, eyes staring into the distance, "I see."

"Oh you finally *see* , do you?" she spat, "What, I'm no longer just a shape moving around in the corner of your self-obsessed eye? You can see me now, can you?"

"I always saw you Bedelia," Hannibal shook his head, "the reason we could never love one another is simple."

"Oh? Do enlighten me!"

"You never saw me," Hannibal stated plainly, staring her straight in the eye.

"What are you *talking* about?" she said, raging; balking at her own words, she sneered, "oh but this little upstart can, that it? Little Will Graham, so lonely and tragic and *ruined* . He *sees* you, does he? Oh, ho ho," her broken voice devolved into a bitter laugh, eyes creasing with vulgar entertainment, "how utterly blind you are. You think he could ever freely give you what you need after what you did to him, that he was ever even an option?"

"I will only ask once more," Hannibal said, patience wearing thin, "Where *is* he, Bedelia?"

"You think any of us could forgive you," she said, smile devolving into hysteria, eyes leaking tears that she clearly resented, "after the things you've done? What you did to all of us? All for some long dead little *bitch!* "

"Bedelia..." his voice was hollow and his eyes cut at her.

"You've never cared about any of us, have you?" she shook her head as she approached; Hannibal watched her solemnly, "Why should he be any different? He's just a means to an end, right? Like we all were. Just a sacrifice to try and bring little Mischa back from the cursed hole you cast her into," she laughed.

"Do *not* say her name!" Hannibal barked, patience breaking, reaching out with claws intent to cause harm, to take a hold of her by the *lily white* throat and...

A sudden, flooding, overwhelming shift in setting. In the blink of an eye the house flashed out of existence around him, and up sprang a bucolic scene like from a pop-up-picture book. *Grass and dirt and the smell of snow and the chill on the air.* It made his stomach roll over to experience it. One moment he'd been in the bland, blood-soaked little house, hand outstretched to end a problem he should have sorted many years before, and now...

All around him was nothing but open scenery; grass and trees and ferns and snow beneath an open grey sky towering above him. Shaking his head, Hannibal blinked, disoriented.

A field of some sort, beside a woodland. How had he come here? Where was this?

To his right stood a large red barn. Bringing his hand down, noting he was once more in his suit and tie, once more glamoured into the *human suit*, Lecter frowned and tried to rationalise this

sudden drastic event imposing itself upon his reality.

To his left a large oak tree, swaying in the wind . It was bizarre. In all his years, nothing had ever imposed itself upon him; rather he had always imposed himself onto others.

And there, standing across the long grass, swaying in a breeze he could not feel, stood the very thing he had searched for over the centuries, become the anchor holding him steady for age after age, through revolution and war and industrialisation, the goal he had kept in his sights, blinkered to the sort of timelessness that would drive lesser beings mad.

"Will," Hannibal found himself saying, unable to hold back the longing in his tone though the word made no sound when it hit the air; he felt as if his voice had been stolen altogether.

Will Graham stood stock still in the menagerie as if he were a player on a stage. He felt like a helpless member of a mute audience, stuck standing straight, left staring at the thing he wished to claim most. It became difficult to understand the mechanics of this world in which he found himself. Not impossible to move, just confusing to do so. Time seemed stretched, or perhaps stopped altogether.

With a sudden and blinding realisation, Hannibal put two and two together and got the answer. It was with a strange twinge of fear that he realised just why his glamour had returned, why he felt suddenly alive, why his skin itched and crawled and he felt utterly out of place.

This was not his mind. It was Will Graham's.

He thought he could imagine his heart thumping in his chest, *making him feel vigorous and full of the many things he thought lost to him: fear, joy, anticipation, guilt.* It was almost absurd, to feel as if he was not entirely himself, but instead how Will Graham imagined him to be. A homunculus populated by Will Graham's impressions of him, his hopes, his desires, his needs, a beautiful sort of innocence, a need for understanding, a quivering and delicate love .

It was overwhelming. For a moment all he could do was...feel. *Readjust and feel* . By the time he managed to right himself into any coherency, Lecter had lost all track of time and given up any hope of mastery over this space. Instead, all he could think of was Will. Doing what he could to find Will.

When he focused on the man he noticed that Graham's grey eyes seemed to stare straight past him while his mouth moved constantly. And yet still there was no sound, *all dead and muted* .

"Will, can you hear me?" he tried to ask, *tried to shout* ; no reply to his muted words.

It was almost anathematic to walk forwards. The disturbance caused by the movement of his limbs seemed to crawl, itching and scratching at his skin. *As if he truly were not meant to be here.* This place was resisting him as much as it could, like swimming against the riptide. He felt it right down to his gums, *the feeling of rubbing a dry towel against teeth.* It was awful, putting one foot in front of the other and walking slowly across the ground, pushing long grass out of the way, fighting with every step, *but he did it regardless.*

He persevered because he always had. No matter who stood in his way, no matter what he must suffer, no matter whose blood must be spilt or life must be ended, *he had always persevered.*

“I can see you,” he said noiselessly as he approached the seemingly sightless figure; now that he was closer he could see that the constant movement of Will’s lips were definitely words being formed, “but I cannot hear you. Will,” even though he still made no sound, Hannibal persisted in talking, “I will find you, do you hear me? *I will find you* .”

It was odd to mirror the motion he had tried to perform only moments before, *lifting his hand up to touch* . Only with Bedelia he had intended to maim, to rip and tear and end her useless rebellion. With Will...he was not sure what his intentions were any longer.

And the closer his hand came to its goal the more the sound started to grow. As if it were coming through a bad connection, a terrible phone line crackling and static, the voice of Will Graham grew in intensity. Though he could not understand what came out the other side of the transmission, Hannibal continued to fight the resistance.

“...an seabhac sa spéir, an sionnach sa fho-bhrú, an péiste sa salachar, an t-iasc san abhainn, an ciaróg ar an duilleog, an béar sa sneachta, an…" Will was speaking in the tongue of his craft, voice tainted by fear.

The moment Hannibal’s fingers touched skin the pair of vague, sightless grey eyes seemed to flick into life; piercing, sharp and terrified as they flashed to him in an instant, gaze boring into his own, *a trepanning to let the demons in* .

Like a dream after waking, Will couldn’t have told you what he saw, only that he could perhaps recall the sound of wind, perhaps the outline of a shape, the colour red. Fuzzy, hectic and confusing comprised ninety nine percent of it; left him with a sour taste in his mouth like morning breath. That was how he would describe it, those moments in that horrible box in the ground after he had closed his eyes and slipped unconscious.

All but for one exception. *Very specific, very short, very important.*

The muted voices and hazy images had been plaguing him, even as he tried desperately to focus his mind. All he could think to do, in his panic, was to recite a *cantaireacht cailleach* that his Elder had taught him when he was naught but six years old. Something to keep his mind sharp, on track. *The reciting of the natural order, a place for everything and everything in its place...*

There had been a strange shift. And then a figure, he thought he saw a figure growing nearer. Then a voice, perhaps a voice, and then a touch and...

BANG.

Clear. Everything was utterly, startlingly, suddenly clear. *From sight to sound* . Blinking, Will felt himself take a breath and could almost have been convinced that the air in his lungs was real, that the bitter chill in his throat was too, that the ornate hallway he was now standing in was real, as was the building around them which appeared almost anachronistically regal, embellished with paintings in elegant frames, beautiful wooden floors and large windows draped in fine curtains, *all painted in the gloom of dusk.*

Only somewhere beyond the grand illusion, he knew. *This was a dream, no more than that* . It helped, he was sure, that he had extensive experience in this field. And also that he recognised the boy standing before him, peering in through the crack of a door left ajar, spilling light out into the darkness.

Lecter. Hannibal Lecter. Though the boy's childish features were very different to the man he had become, the eyes gave him away; so distinct in shape and colour. The nightshirt he wore was puffy but well-tailored, beneath an embellished green robe. A niggle at the back of his mind told him he had seen something like this before, recognised the boy more than just from his resemblance, had been here...

"*Hannibal?"* he heard himself asking without thought, reaching out...

Only his voice did not grace the air, and the hand he had expected to reach out did not materialise. It was somewhat jarring to realise, on inspection, that he was not there in body; *merely spirit* . Nothing but a vision into the past. Will reeled, but forced himself to focus as the light flickered and voices became apparent. As young Hannibal leaned a little closer towards the door, seeming to hold his breath, so did Will feel the need to do the same.

"*...can't. We have to make a decision Simonetta,"* a man's voice, pleading; somehow he knew the words were in a foreign tongue, and yet he understood them perfectly.

"*I won't. You can't expect me to, I won't!"* a woman's voice, melodic but harsh with fury, " *There is nothing wrong with her, she's just a child!"*

"*You think the Court will care what we think? Once the village informs the Inquisition there will be nothing I can do. We have to give her up, don't you understand?"*

"She was only playing," the woman pleaded, " *Hannibal wanted to take her to the market, I didn't think there would be any harm to it."*

"They will come and take us all, you know that! I will not sacrifice everything, I will not have us all killed for the sake of your..."

"*They will burn her,"* the woman's voice had gone soft, hushed, as if the words were too cruel to voice loudly, " *you would have us watch her die to save yourself."*

"To save us all," the man bit back.

A startling and sudden movement beside him drew Will's attention. There, in the dark, Hannibal had moved away from the voyeuristic gap in the door and put his back against the wall. He had his hand over his mouth, almost as if afraid to make any noise. Yet when Will looked closer in the gloom he felt shocked. The boy was crying, and the hand at his mouth appeared to be keeping a scream inside that desperately wanted to escape.

And it was a strange sensation, to feel as if he were somehow in all three places at once. Spread out across a quantum existence, *in the house full of blood, in this dreamscape, in the miserable memory of his past.* All existed simultaneously, and yet much as Schrödinger only one could be true when finally observed.

Nothing but a strange surge of feeling and a tingle in his fingertips and a tickle in his skull, but Hannibal Lecter was sure, somewhere, that he felt compromised. *Will Graham was more powerful than he had even imagined he could be.* And now he was here, in the man's mind, and it almost seemed anything could be possible...

The sky above them drew red like a winter sunset. As Will stared at him intently blood began to run from the corners of his eyes as the iris darkened and the whites turned black. The stark fluid made the pallor of his skin all the more waxen. And there...

A face.

A shy face peering out as if from behind a parent's legs.

A face so familiar it made his heart ache to see it. If there had been breath in his lungs it would have frozen there. If there had been blood in his veins it would have stuttered.

There.

She was *there* .

He could have sworn he remembered the feel of them, the small hands he now saw gripping at Will's clothes; *remembered them fitting daintily in his own as she held his hand while they walked through the market.* And her steady eyes which were now staring at him accusingly; *he remembered they always lit up whenever he walked into a room.* Hair as blonde as ripe wheat; *he remembered platting it gently, brushing the long locks as she hummed* . It was difficult to see her this way, in this state of being *alive* , in this state of truly *feeling* . Hannibal stared. *Just stared.*

Mischa.

Then eyes met eyes, *grey against maroon like a stormy bruise.* Will felt a strange sort of fear creep up his spine as the boy dropped the hand away from his mouth and spoke, while the door creaked open next to them both, and the sun seemed to rise beyond the globe of the dream showering the scene with stark and brutal light.

"Vini mínum vagga ég í ró... *My little friend I lull to rest* ," Hannibal's young mouth sang and he seemed to speak both tongues simultaneously as Will felt the shock turn to horror, as the light illuminated the blood thick on the boy's hands, across his clothes and his face, and there, through the doorway, blood pooling on the floor, sprayed across the grand four poster bed, and the lolling faces of a woman and a man, eyes wide and staring in death as their bodies lay twisted and grim upon the sheets, " En úti biður andlit á glugga... *but outside a face waits by the window."*

Turning away from the sickening sight, Will was faced with a window consumed by fire. Outside there were people, so many people clamouring into the courtyard below, holding weapons and riding horses and with dogs slavering at the ends of leashes, and they were banging at the glass, banging so loudly, and screaming, over and over, and *over* , enough that he wished he could put hands across his ears and beg them to stop, please stop, *please stop..!*

And suddenly Will's eyes seemed to focus, seemed to sharpen, seemed to *see* him. Watch him like a man waiting for the noose to tighten, for the trapdoor to open beneath his feet and let him swing. Suddenly the spell seemed to break and Hannibal was forced to watch as Will fell to his knees, as *Mischa* leaned in and looped a hand around his throat.

Forced to watch.

“Hannibal,” Will managed to breathe out, pained, eyes fixed upon his own desperately, “please, *please don’t do this to me* ...”

Forced to watch as Mischa grinned. Forced to watch as the claws came out. Forced to watch as the little girl he wanted to see alive again more than anything else reached round without hesitation and slit Will Graham’s throat.

“ ***MAKE US WHOLE AGAIN*** .”

Snap! Everything cut out like a light switch being flipped off. *Dark* , and then suddenly **light** . Hannibal blinked and heaved as reality nauseatingly reasserted itself.

It was simply unfortunate that reality was Bedelia Du Maurier sitting atop him with a chef’s knife raised in her hands clasped above her head, skull-like visage pulled into a grim grin. He was only able to suck in a breath and realise unpleasantly that time had still been passing while he was in the dreamscape leaving him vulnerable to his enemies. Trying desperately to lift his hands and shield himself from her blow as she brought the knife down hard, Hannibal’s mind reeled with the implications and the amazement that...

When the gun went off, at this point the shock of it was simply wood on the fire. Bedelia shrieked, crumbling in on her right side, knife dropped clattering to the floor by Hannibal’s head as she tried to grasp at her wound. Only the gun fired again, and again, and she fell backwards to the floor, huffing and screeching. Hannibal hurried to right himself, pushing away the panic in favour of reason.

“Wait!” he called out, kneeling up to put himself between the gunman and Bedelia lying prostrate.

Brian Zeller looked blank, gun still raised. His eyes were glassy as if to hide the disbelief there. Blinking, Hannibal stood up and approached cautiously. When they stood face to face he reached up and gripped the man’s shoulder; it was then that he realised, thankfully, that just as in his dream his glamour had reasserted itself without his permission. *He no longer looked like his true self.* The effect Will Graham had exerted had not only disrupted his mental image but also the fabric of reality; like an imago, born form the chrysalis of their shared dreamscape. Hannibal tried his best to keep himself calm, even as he began to wonder if Will's interference had also interfered with his influence over his thrall, allowing Zeller to regain control and come to his rescue. Looking to the man in question, Hannibal watched closely.

Zeller let out a quiet huff, eyes shedding tears, “Are you...” he cleared his throat, “are you ok?”

“I am fine,” Lecter lied as he stared down at Bedelia, no longer moving, *no longer breathing* .

“Who the fuck...*what* the fuck is that?”

“I think you had best put that away.”

“I had to,” Zeller said, even as he jerkily lowered his gun, “it was gonna kill you!”

“You have my thanks,” Hannibal said steadily.

Amazingly, he thought, he felt the nerves all over his body still playing up as they had in the dream, fizzing and reacting. He could feel the shock and the anger and the adrenaline and the joy at the

near miss of death, all like leftovers now beginning to go stale. A physical truth of Will Graham's power, even beyond the dream the man affected him so.

"I had to," Zeller murmured, closing his eyes and rubbing at his face, " *jesus* . I don't even remember how I got here, I was in the car and then...what the *hell* is going on?"

"I wish I knew," Hannibal said quietly, kneeling down to inspect the corpse.

Bedelia Du Maurier was dead. He had known it from the moment he touched her, but still he turned her over, looked into her vacant, black eyes. *Watched them staring back at him, her mouth fixed in a rictus grin.* As if knowing, even in death, that she had left him with nothing. Nothing but a warning and a vague vision of horror.

"We must hurry," Hannibal said, mouth twitching, "we do not have much time."

"I want a debrief, now."

"I was just about to go down to..."

"I said *now* Katz, no arguments."

And Jack Crawford looked like he meant it. *A man trying to ignore the chopping block in the background, and the axe with his name on it.* Since things had started falling apart they had holed up in the conference room, as if sticking closer together would make up for the slow, crushing feeling that haunted the air, *tearing them apart.*

Staring at the wall as she kept her temper even while Jack Crawford prodded at her like a kid with a stick poking at a bear, she wondered if this was how Will had felt on a daily basis. *The thought was bitter and chilling, and she tried to push away the guilt nipping at her heels* . Focusing on Jack, she allowed regret to fuel her reckless tongue.

"So we're treating this as an abduction then? Because right now I feel like we're ignoring the elephant in the room," she said seriously, eyes hard.

"Ah right, *now* you're concerned about the guy who, just yesterday, you were ready to put a bullet in" Price said, brow raised.

"You don't know what the *hell* you're talking about," Beverly replied coldly, turning her stare on Jimmy; it was a little vindicating that Price shrugged but didn't retort, "if Will is missing, we have procedures in place to..."

"I want everyone *quiet* !" Jack said loudly enough to pull all three sets of startled eyes at once, *Price, Bloom and herself.* It was shocking to see her usually stalwart boss so on edge but it was understandable. She could see the fear there, eating at Crawford's calm.

"Right," Jack continued, voice like a drill sergeant, "now that I've got your attention, let me tell you how this is going to go. I don't answer your questions, *you* answer *mine* , do you understand?" when there was no reply he reiterated strongly, "I said do you *understand?"*

They nodded in an uncoordinated mess of unease, confusion and disbelief.

"Good, because I've been through this before, and I won't be settling for another bad ending."

“You mean another empty grave?” Beverly asked, swallowing as Jack levelled her with an incredulous look. *If there was ever a time to back down it would be now* , she thought. Bevely listened to her conscience and chose not to.

“What did I say about who answers the questions?” Jack spat.

“Ok, well if you’re going to run us like a fucking bunch of mindless soldiers, can you at least tell us what the *hell* is going on?” Katz asked, dumbfounded.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Jack said, “so report, all three of you. I want a rerun of everything I already know, and I want updates on everything I don’t. *Now,* ” Jack turned to a passing admin and stopped them in their tracks, “And someone find out where the *fuck* Zeller is! ”

“He was on his way to see *you* ,” Price said for the umpteenth time, gesturing frustratedly with both hands, “to tell you about our findings,” when Jack gave him a heavy stare Price let out a sound of annoyance and sat down, tapping the fingers of his left hand on the table top, “the Seal. Long story short, we think it was designed to look for Will Graham.”

“But why?” Alana Bloom spoke up, looking fearful; Beverly wished she knew why, considering the woman was always so self-assured.

“No idea,” Price shrugged, “but not for anything wholesome, I can tell you that. And whoever made that Seal knows more about the occult than me. So maybe when we find *them* , we can ask that question.”

When Jack looked livid at Price’s flippancy, Beverly jumped in before another fight could break out.

“I got a hit back, from the check I put out for supplies used to transport human organs and body parts,” she said.

That had Jack’s attention. He seemed to think twice about using Price’s flippancy as an excuse to shout, and nodded to Beverly to continue. She sat down and typed at the keyboard, bringing up her findings on the screen.

“At first I didn’t have any leads, because all the data we received seemed pretty sporadic. Lots of requests for hefty re-stock, more than usual and more frequent, but it wasn’t all in one area. Spread out across the county. But then,” she tapped again to bring up the list of pharmacies, “I found out why. It wasn’t one pharmacy or outlet we were looking for,” she said as she highlighted a series of five pharmacies from the list, “it was multiple. He’s a locum worker, goes where they need him. Here.”

Eldon Stammets. The name stared at her innocuously from the screen, and she wondered if she was looking at the Ripper right there and then. If this was the way he was going to stumble and let them catch him, a bureaucratic fuck-up .

If this was the way they might get Will Graham back.

Beverly licked her lips and tried to feel proud of her work, but it was seeming like too little too late. Her boss was rubbing at his mouth, eyes narrowed as he stared at the screen.

“What do we know about him?” he asked bluntly.

“Hasn't been at work for the past week,” she said significantly, “and apparently he’s always been sketchy about taking days off without giving enough notice.”

“Registered Unnatural?”

“Nope, but we both know that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Sure do,” Jack sighed, “right. I want an APB out on him right now. And what about the arson reports?”

“Will already looked them over,” Beverly said, nonplussed, “seems like they weren’t anything after all, no evidence of ritualistic murder.”

“I don’t buy that,” Jack said, out of character enough that Beverly took notice, “I want someone to take a Pyroficient out to the scenes and have another look. Price, you handle that.”

“A fire witch, *really?”* Beverly said, brow raised, “Why the hell would..?”

“Humour me, Katz,” Crawford said dryly, “and while you’re doing that get in touch with the Maryland Coven. Find Will's car. Find me *something!”*

“Shouldn’t we be in touch with the Registry about this?” Price asked, looking unimpressed, “They would have more extensive records and their people are...”

“I think it’s best we maybe don’t bother them with the minutiae right now,” Jack said, though his smile didn’t reach his eyes, “keep me informed immediately on any updates. Get to it people.”

“Jack?” Alana Bloom touched her boss’s arm to pull him aside; Beverly couldn’t help but be suspicious as he and Bloom had a short but whispered conversation that continued out into the hallway.

Steeling her resolve, she forced her prejudice aside and instead focused on how much she was going to be happy to see him when they found Will Graham.

When, not if.

“I can’t get hold of Hannibal,” Alana Bloom said to Jack Crawford in a hushed voice, “I thought maybe he might know where Will is, but his phone is off. It’s *never* off.”

“Right,” Jack said, voice cold and hard.

Alana frowned as Jack watched her closely, as if looking for a tell, “what is it? Jack?”

“You don’t know then,” Jack shook his head, “after all the revelations you had to spill about Will Graham today, I thought maybe you might have been up to date on his current social life.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Alana asked frantically.

“Doesn’t really matter now, it’s not relevant,” Jack shrugged, turning to walk out of the room. Alana followed at his heels, hands balled into fists.

“Don’t you dare,” she hissed, “this is no time to keep information to yourself like a kid that hasn’t learned to share. Will is *missing* Jack! And after Miriam I thought..!”

When Jack stopped, turning on his heel to face her, *a hulking giant with eyes like murder*, Alana felt her body stiffen with fright. She couldn’t tell quite why but she felt like telling him to back off. Instead, she took a step in retreat and crossed her arms.

“You thought *what* ?” Jack asked, voice flat.

“If you have to ask,” she said sourly, “then I can’t tell you the answer.”

“You want to know how many years it took me to stop having nightmares about losing Lass?” Jack said, tipping his head; Alana felt shocked at hearing the blunt admission from a man so tightly wound she was sometimes amazed he could walk straight, “You really think Will was the only one that couldn’t get over it? Oh, I’m just better at hiding it than he is. I don’t wear my fucking heart on my sleeve, but don’t think I’m some sort of *monster* .”

And with that he turned to storm off down the corridor. Alana watched him go, biting her tongue. It was all very well that Jack and Will flaunted their trauma as if they were the only ones who understood, but now she was the one standing where Will had been all those years ago. *The one waiting for news of the missing friend, and simply left to hope that they would come home alive rather than in pieces.*

When her phone rang, she answered it without looking.

“Dr. Bloom speaking.”

“Oh, Alana! I’m so sorry to phone you at work but I didn’t know what to do!”

“Jackie?” Alana was thrown by her neighbour’s panicked voice.

“They’re gone! They were all just barking so loud, I was worried something was outside...”

“Jackie, slow down, I don’t know what you’re...”

“...and there’s been so many stories recently, of killings, and Unnaturals prowling around, so I just thought I’d let them out to see and then, oh gosh I’m so sorry!”

“For what?” Alana jumped in before Jackie could go off on another tangent.

“The dogs, hun, the dogs they've run off, I can’t find them! It happened so fast, one minute they were fine, then they were barking like crazy, and I let them out and they bolted!”

“Oh my god Jackie what were you thinking?” Alana pressed her palm to her forehead and closed her eyes; *everything felt like it was spiralling out of control, one trauma at a time.*

“Honey I'm sorry, I really am, I was so worried,” Jackie sounded like she was in tears, “Geoff got in the truck and followed them best he could, said he saw them running across the road and into the Beech Forest.”

Alana surprised even herself with the heaviness in her shoulders, her heart; it was difficult not to be truthful when your world was full of revelations.

“They were all together still, he said they were all together,” Jackie was saying, like she was unsure how to reply, “oh Alana, what do you want me to do? Does your friend have them chipped?”

“Yes, Will gave me an app...”

A sudden and startling flash, *a bolt of lightning streaking through the clouds in her brain* . Alana Bloom swallowed, staring out of the window in the corridor. *Running* and *all together* and *barking* and *the dogs.* A thread of hope began to slip across her hands and she grabbed at it desperately.

“Jackie, I need you to tell me *exactly* when this happened.”

A few minutes later Alana hung up and stood, staring out of the window. The dogs knew something was happening, *they had always shared a unique bond with Will,* all she had to do was find them. She pulled up the text message Will had sent when she’d picked up the dogs the week before, all the info on meal times and chip numbers and the app he used to keep track of them. Typing furiously, Alana swallowed and hoped her intuition wasn’t steering her wrong at the worst moment.

I’ll fix this.

“Will? Child, I know you’re in there, and you know I hate talking through doors. So why don’t you come on out.”

Silence would have been easier. With silence she could interpret his mood however she wished. With silence he could have been happy, content and smiling. With silence she could imagine him as someone else entirely. With silence...she could have believed he wasn’t there at all.

Instead, she was forced to listen through the door to the soft sounds of distress Will was trying his best to hide. Her knees hurt from kneeling during the rite, so she decided sitting down would be best. Leaning her back against the wall, Hannah Robicheaux let out a soft sigh as she slid to the ground. With Will it was always a waiting game.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said eventually, when no reply was forthcoming; the sound of a muffled half-swallowed hiccough followed, then a sniff, “these things happen.”

“...There’s something wrong, isn’t there,” came the soft voice she’d been trying to coax out of him for almost an hour now.

“He knew the risks,” Hannah left no room for argument.

She had known that the replacement they had chosen was strong, should have been a safe bet, but the man had fallen at the last hurdle. Every coven needed thirteen, and with Will determined to blaze his own trail out in the world, their soon to be errant member had decided to replace himself. Now...the replacement was nothing but a cold corpse in the next room where the sisters were preparing his body for the fire.

“He accepted them, but he fell prey to them. Becoming a member of a coven you weren’t born into is a difficult trial. There’s never any guarantee of survival...”

“I didn’t mean with what happened,” Will interrupted her; she could hear him moving around in the room beyond the door, “I meant with me. There’s something wrong with me.”

The words sank like a stone through her gut, settling heavy and cold. Are you going to lie to him? *She asked herself. Already knowing the answer made it worse somehow. She had spent her whole life lying to him.*

"There ain't nothing wrong with you. These things just happen," she repeated, hoping that the more she said it the more it would become real.

"I didn't save him."

"How many times you have to be told, not everyone can be saved..."

"You don't understand," Will ground out, "...I let *him die."*

"You did no such thing. His soul wasn't up to the trial. That's all."

"...I'm still leaving," Will sounded harsh, angry, "this won't change anything. I wanted to make sure the coven still had thirteen, that's all. I'm sorry I couldn't...I...I'm still leaving."

"I know."

And knowing wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Ever since he was nothing but a babe in her arms, she had known. Burying her head in the sand and pretending it wasn't real hadn't been the best solution, but it had been the only way to cope.

The first year had been the hardest. Uprooted, terrified and lost, no coven to care for her, no protection from an elder, and the memory of the trauma haunting every moment. Most nights she woke up huffing in breath like a fish out of water, eyes bulging as if she could still see it there before her.

The fountain of blood.

And, of course, the baby. The sweet, innocent little boy that had been thrust into her care by unfeeling, unnatural hands. It had taken a few months to find her way to somewhere safe after the incident, the network of Practitioners was large and close knit if nothing else, and only once she was once more in a house surrounded by witches had she felt capable of taking stock of where she was. Of what had happened. It almost felt as if she had been stumbling forwards for days, weeks, and only now as she sat down and simply *breathed* was she able to truly see the babe in her lap.

Babies had always been her favourite; cooing, gurgling, doughy fingered babies with their curious eyes and taciturn mood swings. Yet when she looked at the sweet little face of Will Graham all she could see was the death that had given birth to him. All she could see was the curse that had tacked itself to his skin. All she could see was the dark creature that had brought him into her world. All she could see was her closest friend ripped limb from limb. All she could see was the creature putting Will into her arms with the severe instruction to keep him safe.

All she could see was the terror of what would surely happen to her if she ever stopped caring for the child.

It had...taken time. She could admit that to herself, even if she felt guilty for it. She had learned to love him. Learned that, coercion or not, Will Graham was worth loving, even if he didn't always understand that himself. *Will had been one cute, quiet, sweet little thing. Always watching her every move with eyes that seemed to understand more than his mere months on earth should allow for.*

And there had been no way to undo what had been done to the boy, which had kept her awake at night for years, riddled with guilt. No way to cure the sickness in him, to put everything back where it should be and save him. It had taken many more years, of researching and believing in herself, before she and her sisters had come up with a plan; not to cure the disease but instead treat the symptoms. *They would lock away the darkness inside, create an intricate series of traps in his mind to keep him safe.* Because if Hannah couldn't stick her head in the sand any longer she was sure as hell going to make sure that Will could.

There was no need for him to ever know what he was carrying inside, or why. She had built a wall in her mind to keep him out, and keep the truth in. The thought of him finding out was too cruel to consider.

When he'd grown up, started telling her secrets he couldn't possibly know, she had done her best to ignore it. When he had started presenting powerful magics at a young age, she had chosen to ignore it. When she would find him sleepwalking into the forest at night, she tried to ignore it. When she had finally been forced to admit it to herself, after years of avoiding the issue as best she could, that Will was far more than just human, far more than just a witch, far more even than an Unnatural...there had been no more room for *ignoring it* .

That the little boy she'd become responsible for, who she had fallen in love with, was cursed. She knew it, even if sometimes she tried her very best to pretend it wasn't so.

"William. I'm going to call him William, after dad, you know?"

Sweet Hannah Graham. *She would have been a great mother* , she had always told herself that. Her sister, her friend, one of their thirteen. The two Hannah's, that's how everyone knew them; and Trouble One and Two was what their Elder called them. They had grown up together, drinking lemonade on the porch with their skirts hiked up on their knees, sneaking out to go dancing in the heat with the normal folk, covering for each other when the Elder would get grouchy about chores, telling each other their secrets, their dreams, *their futures.*

Knowing had only made it worse. Knowing what had happened to Hannah Graham, *even if no one would believe her.* Knowing what had happened to Ryan Villarreal, Will's father, *even if she wished she never did.*

" *It was the only way,* " she would remember it till the day she died, as Hannah Graham had spoken with an even tone, haunted eyes focusing on something she couldn't see, " *I had to do it. I had to, or I would have died.* We *would have died! I had to do it, don't you understand?"*

Hannah Robicheaux wasn't sure if she ever would. It was shameful, *she would always hate that she had been so hateful of it.* And she knew that it was unfair to condemn her sister, *her namesake sister whom she had laughed with and cried with and fought with and made up with and loved for years* . Extreme situations led to extreme solutions. The thought of having the same choice forced upon herself was sickening, but still she had tried to believe she would never have gone as far as her sister had. Liked to think she would have been strong enough to resist.

Only this had been engineered by a creature with motives black as tar and no compunction for human misery. The very thought of him made her sick, made her burn inside to take a vengeance years in the making. To take his world and crush it just as he had done to hers.

" *Oh god Ryan* ," her sister had said, gripping her hands tightly as tears leaked in a constant stream across her expressionless face, " *He's dead. He's dead Hannah, he's dead! It was the only way to*

save the baby. I had to. I had to...It was the only way to save little Will. But he's not..." she had gagged, spitting up bile, and her skin had gone pale and clammy, " *something's wrong. Something changed in me, when I did it. I don't think I'm human any more Hannah. I don't think..."* she had grimaced nervously, eyes bulging*, "oh goddess I don't think Will is either."*

And as she'd held her sister tightly their Elder had decreed the ritual, and the siters had followed it, because that's how things worked. The Elder knew how to keep the magic pure and they would follow her to the letter: the only way to save Hannah Graham, to save one of the thirteen of their coven, was to sacrifice the child she'd condemned herself in order to save. The only way for her spirit to be purified was to sacrifice the sin she had blighted upon the world.

The only way to keep them all safe was to make the child pay for the cost of what she had done.

" *I killed him, Hannah,* " she had sobbed, holding onto her tightly even as the contractions started, voice hysterical, " *oh why? Why did it happen? I killed him and I...I ate him. I can still, oh god I can still taste it! Oh god Hannah I'll never be free of it. I'll never get the stains out. What's going to happen to us? What's going to happen to Will?"*

Standing at the side of the road, Hannah Robicheaux gathered what strength she had left and began to walk. Even though her body had aged, her mind was as it had been all those years ago; sharp and wise and remembering everything: *the first day of school, being so proud as he joined her in the coven, reading the stories that he would write, playing hide and seek in the back garden, holding him tight after a nightmare, scolding him for things he couldn't control only to make it up to him with kind words and guilty treats.*

Closing her eyes, she wished she could have had longer. Wished that the truth could have given them longer together before it had forced itself back upon their lives. Wished she didn't feel so sad that she'd hoped beyond hope that time would take that responsibility from her hands.

That she could have been granted the relief of passing away before ever having to explain to her precious Will that he was destined for death.

Chapter End Notes

"an seabhac sa spéir, an sionnach ar an talamh, an péiste sa salachar, an t-iasc san abhainn, an ciaróg ar an duilleog, an béar sa sneachta, an..."
'the hawk in the sky, the fox in the underbrush, the worm in the dirt, the fish in the river, the beetle on the leaf, the bear in the snow, the... '

"cantaireacht cailleach"
'Witch chant'

Incarnate

Chapter Notes

> Hello all, just wanted to say apologies for the very long hiatus for this one. I have been writing this one chapter most of the last year, trying to get it just right. Honestly, I'm glad I waited and kept at it because if I'd gone with the first draught then the ending for this story would have been very different! Hope you all enjoy, and that it was worth waiting for 😅! And I'll try my best to get the next chapter out in a more timely fashion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The paper was fragile under his fingertips, dry and almost crisp. He shouldn't be handling it, he knew that, but there was something about the physical touch of the artefacts; an intimacy that was only hindered by glass or plastic. A connection to a family now long since dead.

Sitting in his windowless office, leaning heavily against his metal desk, Hopkins took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Silence.

Silence, and then...

...a deep, long rumble, and the sound of ancient industry and a language he could not understand...

By the time his eyes had closed and then snapped back open, slightly woozy, it felt like seconds, and yet the clock on the wall showed twenty minutes had passed. Licking his lips he sat back in his chair, chewing absently on his thumbnail. With his spare hand he slid the vellum back into its glass container and snapped the snib shut.

Before him, mainly sealed away in warded containers, were the remnants of his family legacy. It wasn't often that he bothered to request them, it was such a hassle after all to go through the warding processes with the Practitioners and have the office sealed. Still...it was worth it to feel this way, even if just for a little while. Like he had done the right thing; *was doing the right thing.* His father had placed a heavy burden upon his shoulders, and he had never complained. *Not openly, even if his mother had hated that he'd been drawn into this never ending crusade* . Completing a work started generations ago.

Finding a connection back to the old gods long since lost.

Hopkins stared at another of the delicate vellum documents, silent in its see-through container. Even through the shine on the glass the writing was starkly clear for something that was over three hundred years old. A report, or maybe more an ancient memo as he liked to think of it, of an event that might be called the epicentre of this whole affair. Scrawled neatly in black ink above the great regal red wax seal of the king, it was illuminated with bright red and gold official crests. Pasted to the warding glass case was a translation.

His Majesty's Official,
Arcani Regis,

In regards this Lecter debacle, you have permission to annex the children...

A quick and sudden rap at the door had him startled; Hopkins simply stared at the door for longer than he meant to, jerking again when the insistent knock sounded a second time. Quickly but carefully he put away the relics that were still out of their casings and slotted them back into the sealed casket before clipping it closed and placing it under his desk. Shaking out his hands and working his shoulders, Hopkins sniffed loudly and cleared his throat before unlocking the wards and pressing a button by his phone.

"Enter."

The door gave a loud click and was almost instantly opened by a brash and clearly indignant Egon Adebayo. The man's lips were tightly pressed together, and his skin shone with a thin sheen of sweat, letting Hopkins know that Adebayo had been down in the lower levels again continuing their preparations for the ritual. Not that it was a difficult guess, considering his companion who followed him in and politely closed the door.

Chiyoh, better known to those in the Registry as his Master of Ceremonies, was her usual unreadable self. Her porcelain skin and lush, black hair cut into a stylish bob were mainly obscured by a heavy protective ceremonial robe, leaving only her face exposed; to anyone else he was sure she looked staid. To him she looked pissed off.

It seemed, from Egon's diatribe, that they had been arguing before they arrived.

"I need you to talk some sense into her!" Egon spat, pointing rudely at Chiyoh .

"What is it now?" Hopkins asked, sighing as he sat back, *trying to look relaxed even if he didn't feel it.*

"It's happening," his Master of Ceremonies stated, "it's happening *now."*

"It's happening..?" Hopkins' eyes jumped to her, amazed, "When was this confirmed..?"

"Then we *let* it happen! In case you have forgotten this is exactly the outcome we have been waiting for, and I predicted..." Adebayo argued back.

"Do you really think I care about your predictions?" Chiyoh stated factually, "We have no control over it out in the wild; I have created a strict area of containment here at this facility which cannot be rivalled. The ritual must happen *here* ."

"Which we can only take your word for," Egon said flippantly, "suppose you have made a mistake?"

"Please, will you both..?" Hopkins tried to intervene, his mind racing as he rushed through the plans in his head.

"This is reality, little man, and I don't make mistakes," Chiyo said coldly.

"I shouldn't have to stand here and listen to this!" Adebayo sneered, his lip curling as he gestured stiffly to the woman standing to his left.

“Which is where you always fall short,” Chiyo said, matter-of-fact, “turning this into an excuse to stroke your ego, and not thinking about the greater...”

“I am *more than capable of..!”*

“Alright, enough,” Hopkins cut in, blinking as he lifted his hand, “ *please* , Egon. Enough.”

“We have worked too hard for this,” Adebayo bit out tightly, anger and desperation obvious as he stared Hopkins directly in the eyes, “for us to stumble at the last hurdle.”

“Nothing will go wrong,” was all Hopkins could think of to placate the man, “we’re prepared for an emergency just like this, and if it’s a false alarm then it’s a false alarm we will deal with it accordingly,” as Egon made to speak Hopkins gave him a stern stare, “we stick to the contingency, do you understand me?”

Adebayo was fuming, Hopkins knew, but he did not have the energy to care. He’d known Egon long enough to know this was acceptable. *But only just.* He watched as the man stormed out of the room in a controlled rage. Sitting back in his chair was a habitual move, rubbing at his eyes, but it was a mistake when so tired. When he regained his composure he found Chiyoh watching him dispassionately, which to an extent he appreciated. Beside Egon’s florid and passionate temper, she was a soothing balm of indifference.

“If you are fatigued you should get some rest,” she said calmly, “Allow me to continue with the third stage.”

“At a time like this? No. We’ve allowed this group of savages too much leeway, more than intended, and now they’re threatening the sanctity of the ritual. This is all Lecter’s fault,” he tried and failed to keep the venom from his voice, sighing.

Blinking slowly, she tilted her head, eyes focused just over his right shoulder, “He certainly is...a fascinating creature.”

“I’m starting to think I’m the only one around here who’d rather see him six feet under,” he muttered, rubbing at his closed eyelids roughly; when he opened them she was focused, staring, right at him, “...right now we need all available personnel to deal with any uncertainties.”

“I hope you are not doubting me too?” she said, tone slightly sour as she raised a delicate eyebrow.

Hopkins managed a tight smile, “I’ve not made a habit of doubting Practitioners as experienced in scrying as you are,” he noted a small frown line at her forehead smooth out on hearing the placation; he’d hired her on reputation and recommendation, but since starting with him she’d impressed him with her foresight and ability to sense the inscrutable. He wasn’t generally one to hand out compliments, but at that moment it seemed wise, “but I also like to keep my options open when dealing with such a sensitive operation.”

Ever since Jack Crawford’s call earlier that day, to lay idle threats at his doorstep, things had gone south; at least that’s what he had told himself in order to mitigate the blame he felt for this shitshow. In truth, he knew he’d been careless. Or perhaps reckless was closer to the mark. Now they were here, *Graham missing, and suddenly the summoning was imminent.* The pressure tingled against his skin like ants. This had been a long time coming. Years upon years, *generations worth of family expectation falling down like sand in an hourglass, trickling to a point where the sand condensed and squeezed through.*

He was there now, at that point. And he felt the squeeze.

Just as he opened his mouth to reply, the phone on his desk rang harshly. Licking his dry lips he pressed for speakerphone, “Hopkins.”

“Sir, this is Red Team. We’ve located the body of Clark Ingram.”

Hopkins sat up as straight as he could, “So he is dead. Where?”

“A car wreck in Halethorpe, it was in the open but no one reported it. We managed to round up witnesses.”

“Anything useful?”

“They remembered the wreck, but not who was involved, or any other vehicles. They were...suspiciously ignorant on the details.”

“Lecter,” Hopkins muttered coldly, taking a deep breath, “I want CCTV from the area, I want traffic cameras, I want anything that can tell us more. We have to find the Asset, ASAP. And all teams are to be put on high alert.”

“Yes sir,” the Team Leader said dutifully, “I will keep you posted.”

As soon as the phone hit the receiver it rang again, making Hopkins start. *Another harsh ring* . Hopkins felt his lips grow tight, locking eyes with Chiyoh.

“Hopkins,” he answered coldly.

“This is Green Team leader, reporting in. We’ve been called out to a compromised site in Hersham by concerned neighbours.”

“Report,” Hopkins said greedily, leaning forwards.

“There has clearly been a conflict. From the amount of blood at the home we suspect there is an unknown victim. But we have an asset D in custody.”

“...I see,” Hopkins sighed, realising he should have known Du Maruier would be involved in this somehow, “I’d like her brought in. We can use her. But I need you to have a clean up crew retrieve the her, and all Teams are to be placed on high alert. We are seeking Asset G, with no exceptions.”

There was a clear beat of silence that spoke of amazement, before the Registry guard spoke, voice hard and professional, “Understood.”

The line went dead. The room was suddenly very quiet as the two occupants simply watched each other.

“I don’t need to tell you that this cannot happen yet,” he knew he’d let the hint of desperation leak into his tone, “We are not fully prepared, I agree with you. If this is happening as you say, then we must delay it.”

“Yes,” Chiyoh said, inclining her head to the left, her eyes wandering, out of focus, as he noted her doing often; he had started to wonder just how much she saw and whether her eyes were always on the present when they spoke, or perhaps at that moment she was seeing something that was to

come, “Everyone is on edge. It is not every day a channel of communication is opened between our plane and those beyond. This moment has been hundreds of years in the making, and yet the next few hours will be crucial. Time,” she said, voice suddenly toneless, eyes sullen, “is a cruel mistress.”

“You’re not wrong there," Hopkins said tiredly, blinking once more as his eyes refocused, “We will follow your lead, Doctor.”

“Then we mobilise,” she said clinically, “before this becomes unsalvageable.”

Eyes. *Beautiful eyes, the colour of wine.* They had been one of the first things Will Graham had taken note of when he first met Hannibal Lecter.

It had seemed such an inconsequential detail hidden within an inconsequential moment in his life, that staid meeting in Crawford’s office, full of resentment and old ghosts. *This irritating and arrogant man being foisted onto his already complicated life.* And yet...somehow they had moved beyond that far quicker than anticipated. Sometimes repulsed by him like any animal was at the sight of a corpse. Sometimes drawn to him like a proverbial moth to the flame that would consume its wings and devour its mind.

Sometimes...sometimes, he felt as if he’d known Hannibal Lecter for decades longer than was possible, and others he felt like more of a stranger than was reasonable. And yet...

There was no denying that it was a meeting touched by destiny; Lecter had known it then, Will was sure, even if he had not.

Eyes.

Windows to a soul, tinted as if with blood.

It should have been a warning, he supposed, but that seemed a little on the nose, even for him. In his world omens came like a subtle knife to the back, always swathed in silks and shadows. Someone with a monstrous trait like fangs or scales or oddly coloured eyes was not something Will took notice of, generally; stereotypes bred realisation of differences which in turn gave birth to unnecessary resentments and unfounded hatred. Better left in the dirt, he had always thought bitterly, where they belonged.

Eyes that had seen him.

Seen him for who he was.

A rare commodity in his profession. Or perhaps just...for him. Something new, something needy, something he was greedy for even if he would hardly admit it to himself. Will felt as if he’d been waiting a lifetime for Lecter to show up, and now that he was here caution was no longer an issue.

Those eyes. They had watched him with many emotions, *curiosity, annoyance, hunger, resentment, lust, surprise, nostalgia.* All the faces that Hannibal Lecter had shown to him through those eyes, even as the man’s visage stayed placid as a mill pond. Such beauty in his depth of feeling, hiding the truth of his being beneath it all.

What...are you?

He wanted to ask the question now, here within this dream they were sharing, the snow underfoot and the sky above dark and gloomy, but his mouth would not move. And all the while, *those eyes stared at him across the dreamscape.* Only now they were tragic, *the eyes of a tragic man.* Staring at something they could not change, watching the inevitable taking place and wishing it could be different.

What is it? He wanted to shout, *What's happening to us?* But things were never as they seemed, and in that moment he realised those eyes, *the colour of wine, of blood...* they were not watching him. They were staring at something else...something behind him...

Those were the last desperate thoughts Will Graham was capable of before the descent started.

A sudden, sodden feeling cascaded, blurting down his shirt front. A sense of release. In a dreamscape such as this Will didn't count that as a good feeling; any sense of dread and strange visions here were always related to what was happening in reality. What he saw here, in the dream, could be a product of what was happening in the real world at that moment in time.

And right now...he was dying. So it only made sense to look down and see...

"Would you *slow down* ? You're going to- *JESUS CHRIST!* "

Brian couldn't even remember the last time he'd let someone else drive him somewhere. *Not since his drunk brother had put them both in the hospital when Brian was only nine years old.* Ever since his eighteenth birthday he'd begged nothing from his mother other than driving lessons, which he had passed quickly and efficiently so that he would never have to be a passenger again. And yet now...

"Pull over. I said *pull over* you crazy bastard!" Brian found himself yelling at Lecter in the driver's seat, as the man straightened the car back out after their seriously-too-close-call with an oncoming semi-truck, "You're going to get us fucking killed!"

But Lecter didn't seem to be listening. Zeller leaned forwards and waved his hand, trying to get some attention. Things were already utterly screwed as far as he was concerned. Sometimes he was amazed by how quickly things had gone south. *Memories of his finger pulling the trigger, that creature falling to the ground dead, black blood rushing from its wounds, and worst of all...no memory of why he'd done it. The creature that had looked just like the drawing Will had done weeks ago when he first joined the case, the one that was still sitting unidentified in the case file, black skin and antlers protruding from its skull...*

And now this, letting Lecter drive his goddamn car and put them both in mortal peril. The man was driving like a demon, possessed only of a singular goal and deaf and blind to all else. To be truthful, Brian didn't even remember giving the man his keys and getting into the car. *His memory felt suddenly unreliable and vague, and it was a sinking feeling.*

Things were unravelling, and he was trying his best to wrap up the threads as quickly as they fell so they could find Will, because there was still time and things were going be ok, not like Miriam Lass, not like her, Will would be ok if he just kept going forwards and...

Christ you like to listen to your own bullshit, don't you, he thought miserably. This was the reason he didn't like to give himself too much time to think. Too much truth was lying in wait, ready to pounce at any sign of weakness. Focusing back in on Lecter, Brian persisted before he could be

talked out of it, because he was finding that the good Doctor could be damn persuasive when he wanted to be.

“Hey, you in there?” Brian urged, finally garnering Lecter’s attention while the man held the steering wheel in a death grip. The man looked pale.

“Running out of time,” Lecter was muttering as he put his foot down to beat a red light.

“What? How do you know that..?”

“You have to trust me,” Lecter said, though his eyes were scattered across the windshield, as if searching. When they finally found Brian’s and held them, Zeller wished the man hadn’t; the stare stung like poison, “ **trust me** .”

Like he had a choice.

Looking down had been a mistake...

Red.

Red.

Blood.

Will would have screamed if the knife hadn’t gone through his throat, through his neck, and felt as if somewhere, somehow, *sometime* , that it had cut something vital, something necessary, some thread within the core of his being that was holding him together, holding everything together, that it was coming close to slicing through the last thread that was keeping everything intact, everything as it was, everything as it should be...

He was left hanging by a thread.

Blood surging, blood gushing, beginning to pool around his feet. Will lifted futile hands up to his neck to try and stem the tide even as he fell to his knees, weak. The oily slick of blood gushed across trembling fingers.

Dying; how long have you been dying for now? He asked himself jadedly. Lying in the box in the ground bleeding slowly until there was nothing left. Perhaps this plan to seek help from the one man he knew could offer it had been too little too late. Perhaps this was...it. Capital I, capital T.

Crumpling onto the ground he found himself on his side, eyes staring at snow crystals melting into red liquid. Watching with a detached fascination as the blood began to rise, lapping against his skin as if it had its own tidal system, *small waves waxing and waning, like nights at North beach on Lake Charles as a child, the firelight dancing as he and his sisters played*. His vision blurred, turned carmine as if looking through a sweet wrapper. Soon he could feel it in his nose, entering his mouth. He wanted to choke on it, but his mind was still unsure as to which reality it should conform.

This fantasy? Or the reality of a lonely death beneath the earth? The two were becoming one.

Half remembered images desperately tried to make sense in his mind. *Lecter, he remembered him there, could still see him, shocked, appalled; was it even real?*

Half remembered feelings clinging to his skin like imagined leeches. A pain that was not pain, a gaping maw at his neck caused by an unseen malice. *Somone...someone had cut his throat...*

The sky above, so tumultuous and pregnant with threat, rolled like a wave with no land to break upon; he was sinking, falling, rising. Up or down? His stomach jumped. His eyes closed against the nauseous tumble and the liquid rising above them.

A slow but inevitable quiet descended, like being underwater.

Muffled.

Calming.

Empty.

And then...there was a sound; a deep, resonant sound.

There was a feeling of weightlessness. Timelessness.

There was nothing.

And then just as quickly as it started, it stopped.

Will Graham had spent much of his life experiencing fear, whether his own or through another's thoughts. But this, here in the darkness, was a fear like no other he had experienced before. A rational, primal terror that had crawled out of his hindbrain to protect what little sanity he had left, and it was making itself known.

Maybe you should listen to it, Will joked with himself humourlessly.

But the truth was that things had not simply stopped, that was simply the only way he could explain what he was experiencing. There was not *nothing.* There was something there, just beyond the dark. Something watching him.

O-P-E-N

A sound across time, reaching for him from before and beyond and right now, here, clasping him in its jaws and demanding obedience. The word rang in his mind like church bell heard from a far-off hill, familiar but alarming. The feeling reminded him distinctly of Lecter and his failed attempts to control him. Only this was different...

"I don't want to," he mumbled even as he began to concede defeat, feeling his lips touching and pulling apart; *real, this was real..? "* What if all I find is the darkness," the fearful thoughts continued to invade and conquer, "what if I'm still down there in that fucking box? What if it was all just a miserable dream, a hallucination extended out on the edge of death. What if I'm still down there, dying? What if I'm already..?"

S-E-E

His eyes flew open without his consent.

A light.

There was a light.

A small, flashing light in the dark, *like the irritating blink of an answer machine you were trying to ignore* .

A light that started to multiply and spread until there was nothing but twinkling lights everywhere he looked. Will realised he was no longer where he had been moments before.

The gasp was involuntary. *Air sucked into a tight chest, both in wonderment at the sight revealed to him, and relief that it was not simply the expected darkness of his underground confinement.*

He knew this place. He was here. He was *home.*

"Would you hurry the hell up!" she slammed on her horn again and again, furious.

She couldn't have remembered the last time she had felt so anxious. As a psychiatrist she knew she fell into the trap of always analysing others and never yourself. She had been unhappy for a while now, but unwilling to admit it. Or show it. *Things weren't exactly as she'd expected them to be by this point in her life.* Everyone thought she should be pleased, be content, *her career was going well, she was healthy;* her family and friends all expected the best of her and she played along.

In reality sometimes Alana felt like she was sinking below the water, treading it fitfully as she watched the storm approaching. *The end of the charade.* Ever since meeting Will Graham things had changed. She had changed, or so she liked to tell herself. It was more fitting to admit that he hadn't changed her, that instead he had revealed who she really was.

Alana Bloom put her foot on the accelerator and threw her car to the right, veering out into oncoming traffic as horns blared and tyres squealed and drivers panicked to avoid her. The cars ahead had stopped, she could see heads swivelling round to figure out what the commotion was all about, but by then she'd turned back into her lane and sped off, leaving a mess in her wake.

You love him , she told herself sternly as she glanced at her phone in its holder by the GPS, following the updates that came every fifteen seconds on the Dog Tracker, *you just never had the guts to tell him to his face. Make him give you an answer, even if it wasn't what you would want to hear.*

The worst part, she expected, was that she was too good at reading people. She knew Will cared about her, but he did not love her. Not in the way she needed him to. *And now here you are, risking everything you've built, your job, your professional reputation, maybe even your freedom, all for a man that doesn't know what the hell he wants.*

The road flew past, trees flitting by like a zoetrope. *Don't you dare,* she found herself thinking even though she had hardened herself against facing the worst case scenario, *don't you dare die on me Will Graham.*

The Semi-truck appeared like a monolith as she turned the corner too fast. The blaring horn was deafening, and Alana oversteered out onto the dirt, grass flying up from desperate wheels until she spun to a stop. As the truck ploughed past her, horn leaving a doppler effect in its wake, Alana thought her heart was going to thump out of her chest, fingers tight around the wheel. After a few beats, she let her forehead fall forward against the wheel and laughed, jittery.

It was only when she brought her eyes back up to the road that she caught sight of the road sign and realised, after blindly chasing the signal of Will Graham's dog pack for the last twenty minutes, exactly where they were leading her.

[WOLFTRAP – 2 miles]

Home. All around him, it seemed so real he felt he could reach out and touch it. **He...was.** The evening light was shining in through the windows, and the dogs were dotted all over the living room in states of sleepy snoring, paws twitching. **He...was...home.**

It took everything he had left to realise, at the penultimate moment, that this was...a memory...

(*Standing above the phone, he felt unsure.* The dream was still tingling at his senses, the terror of it eating at him. *Biting at his nails, Will Graham sighed. It had only been two days but somehow that was long enough to give him pause. Made him realise that, really, since they'd started working together he spoke to Miriam almost every day, enough that the absence of it was making him anxious. I mean, calling every day? That was something he'd fallen out of practice of doing even with his Matron. Now, he felt trapped in his own house with too much to say and no one around to hear it.*

Feeling another sigh coming on, Will kicked his heel against the skirting board and shook his head. Picking up the phone he leaned against the wall, worrying a hangnail with his teeth. On the sixth ring he started grinding his teeth.

"Come on," he murmured to himself in irritation.

"Hello?" the answer finally came.

"What the hell took you so long?" he rebutted caustically.

"...Nothing."

Lass sounded despondent, and Will hated the instant guilt that bloomed in his chest on hearing the lacklustre tone. Blinking, he rubbed at his forehead, tense enough to still refuse to apologise.

"Yeah, well," he muttered, "I thought you might...I mean, Crawford called. Said he won't need us in tomorrow. They're rearranging, restructuring, whatever you call it. I don't know if it'll be good for us or not but..." there was suspicious silence from the other end of the phone, "didn't he call you?"

"Uh, no. Or maybe I missed his call?"

"Since when do you miss calls?" Will realised it was a stupid question as soon as he'd asked it.

"Hell, it's my day off," Lass said dryly, "can't a girl get a break?"

Suspicion mixed with the guilt, a bad cocktail in his stomach. Wrapping an arm across his abdomen, Will felt small. Need her more than she needs you, huh? *He tried to ignore the toxic thought.*

"Well, I guess I just wanted to check with you," he floundered, "uh, make sure you knew we're not needed in the office tomorrow."

“Sure. Right. I’m fine, and thanks for letting me know,” it was a perfunctory and genial statement; Will swallowed, “I’ll speak to you tomorrow, ok?”

Suddenly, the world shifted. He felt strange, like there was something crawling inside his skull, as if this had already happened. It was as if he could see Miriam hanging up on the other end of a long, long hallway. Something itched behind his eyes...)

The world stayed the same, and yet he moved through it like a thief. Time was as nothing, as if were everywhere at once and yet also *nowhere* . And then existence seemed to accordion back out again, decompress, and suddenly he was holding the phone in his other hand. He blinked, feeling odd, trying to remember his name. There was a voice speaking to him...

(“Hey, don’t hang up,” his own voice. It was his own voice, coming through the receiver, “Lass?”

“Yeah, I’m still here,” his lips moved to form the words, voice high pitched, strange, definitely coming from him, “what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I mean, not right now. Look,” he listened to his own voice and felt ill, “I just...I had a dream last night, ok? More of a nightmare. I mean, hell, that’s not important. I just want you to be careful. Can you? For a little while?”

“I’m always careful,” Lass spoke, as he spoke *, “you know me. I really have to go now.”*

“Alright,” Will sounded disappointed, reluctant, adding out of habit, “see you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

On looking up, he balked. In a large hanging mirror on the opposite wall he saw himself, only he was not himself . *Miriam Lass stared back at him, stern eyes showing her mind was made up. As she got up to move towards the living room, so he felt that he did, though there was no agency to the movement.* He was living behind her eyes, peering out like a child.

He watched as she swithered by the door, pacing back and forth. She took her hair down, just to put it back up again. Eventually, she moved to the living room and rummaged in her handbag, pulling out a disturbingly familiar picture, The Vitruvian Man sketched on vellum, all folded through with lines. It was the very same as the one they had found at her apartment after she disappeared, that awful day when they had found the arm. *Currently, she was staring at it. She scuffed her foot on the floor and muttered to herself, ‘He’ll forgive you. He’ll forgive you when you save him’. Lass stuffed it back into her purse and then seemed to hesitate, putting her purse down with finality onto the coffee table before fetching her coat. As they made their way out of the flat and down to the street, Will wished he had more control.*

He felt himself becoming smaller and smaller, nothing but an observer as she drove, sometimes biting her nails when they stopped at red lights, sometimes humming to herself, which she only did when anxious.

Will wished he knew what the hell was going on. Wished he could understand how and why this was happening. But then...

...then everything flew right out the window. Everything became slow and fluid, as he watched through Miriam Lass’s eyes as she pulled up into a very familiar driveway. The crunch of the gravel

as she exited the car sent sirens flying in his mind. The smell of the jasmine, strong and powerful, as she walked towards the grand doorway.

It can't be *, was all he could think,* it can't be this. *As the door opened to reveal...* eyes the colour of wine.

"Miss Lass," Hannibal Lecter said in his usual silken tone; it made Will feel ill to hear it, *"I had hoped to see you again."*

Again? Was all Will could think. *Again?* The word tore his world apart.

"Don't try and dress this up in pretty words, doctor," Lass said sternly, but he could feel the waver in her/ his *throat, "I'm doing this for Will, not for you."*

"Of course, I understand," Hannibal bowed his head, "I would expect no less. Please, come inside."

And he wanted to scream but couldn't. And he wanted to grab her but could not, because he was her, and as Lecter opened the door and he stepped through with her the world twisted and broke, changing, remembering, *and the hallway they walked down ended in a door, a familiar door, a door opening and closing again and again, and there was heat against his skin, hot humid air, and they grew closer to the door, one foot, then the other, Lecter walking at his side like a gruesome guide, and as they approached the wailing began, slowly and then building and building, the wail of an infant.*

Lecter grasped the door like a concierge, bowing his head as if in supplication, hand to his chest, and opened it...

Stepping through was like going back in time and seeing your own birth. Will no longer felt Lass, no longer saw Lecter. Instead, he stepped through into a bathroom with wooden walls painted white, a single exposed bulb hanging from the ceiling attracted large black, silken winged moths to it that flapped like birds. The room was full of people, maybe thirteen or so? All kneeling, all facing towards the bath in the corner. All except one, one person standing at the head of the congregation, holding something he couldn't see. Stepping through the kneeling people, careful not to touch, Will felt his world shaking, cracking, *destroying itself.* And yet he could not stop, even if he'd wanted to. His feet carried him carefully through the throng of people,*women, he discovered as he watched them, they were all women,* towards the bath. And when he reached it, when he finally reached the woman there...

The photograph. It was like looking at the photograph he had been sent. Chocolate curls, full lips, grey eyes. She looked just like her picture. *Mother.*

And Will felt as if it were ineluctable to look down, down into her arms, and see....

...himself. A small baby, new born, skin black as the void with two small nubs on its skull like a fawn, eyes only just opened, toothless mouth open wide as it cried and cried. But it was him, and he was it. As he blinked, the baby blinked.

Everything had shrunk down to here. This moment. This place.

"Now, Hannah. Do it now!" someone spoke, and he wished he could shout, scream, anything as...

The woman dropped to her knees and plunged the baby into the water. Will felt the water rush into his lungs, his vision wavering, sound booming in his ears, fear rushing through his system.

And the world swayed and rocked, as if he were shifting on a ship at sea, rising and falling with the waves as the world sank away like a shipwreck, pulling him down with it.

And the final thread snapped.

Panic.

For almost every organism, it was an inbuilt and useful survival tool. Panic allowed for the decision between fight or flight, it narrowed the experience of time down to milliseconds rather than minutes. It forced the brain to face its darkest fears and either fail or prevail.

And yet, for him, it was a foreign feeling; not as many would believe due to his being an Unnatural of a great age, but truly because of his personality in general. To be perfectly honest Hannibal Lecter had never been a particularly uptight or anxious child. His family had lived a charmed life...right up until they were killed one by one and he was left to limp on through the ages, cursed.

Years and decades and centuries spent learning to control his emotions, like a man beating a horse for disobeying. *Punishing himself for ever deigning to feel anything ever again that wasn't astringent and all-consuming hope.* He was not allowed to feel pain at her loss, it was too damning. Mischa, his dear Mischa; he had not been able to save her then. Thinking of it now was almost ridiculous. *Things had become so different, so quickly. Times had changed. Things had changed.*

He had changed, *even if for a long time he had refused to believe it* . Even now it was almost impossible to believe that it was true. That he had seen her. *His sister, dear sweet sister.* It had been so long, he wasn't sure if he would remember her correctly. Was it right, had she been *correct* ? It was so difficult to assure the clarity of his human memories sometimes, and now there was no time to focus, dwell on the past. Because things were moving, things were happening without his consent, and he should have been thinking about the best way to utilise this situation to its full potential but...

Here he was, now, his veins burning as they pumped adrenaline around his starved system. The haunting thought of what was going to happen eating away at what little calm he could summon. It was jarring and, to an extent, embarrassing. As one who lied for a living, Hannibal had come to pride himself on his excellent control over every aspect of his life, both physically and emotionally. But this...

Panic.

Bona fide panic. The last time he had felt it? It had been an age. He had been young, so very young. *Many lifetimes ago* . The memory of the dream he had shared with Will Graham sprang into his mind as he put his foot down on the gas and forced the car to leap forwards, ignoring Zeller's cursing. The dream that had connected them both, *the last time he had ever truly panicked,* allowing them to witness the moment he had been remade. The truth of his being.

Monster.

Only...Will Graham had never looked upon him as a monster. Even though the man knew it to be true, deep in his soul, Hannibal could tell Will trusted him . *More fool him, the poor wretch,* he

tried to tell himself, but it wasn't as sincere as he hoped. The dark little outline around Graham had been growing lately, just as Hannibal had hoped, as he had prepared the man for what was to come, for the end of this long journey, and yet...

And yet now...things were different. Things had changed and become different...and it worried him. He had always known that Will Graham's destiny would be something special, something new and exciting. He had done what he had done to create the perfect conditions, the perfect creature, the perfect *doorway* . He had completed the complicated ritual, he had killed at the right times in the right places, he had used Bedelia to create Chilton's rag tag band to continue his work and leave him untouchable, he had wiped out any competition or threat. It had all been utterly and spectacularly perfect...

...but for one tiny, almost insignificant thorn sticking in his paw.

Will Graham. He hadn't counted on Will Graham.

He hadn't counted on Will Graham making him ...*feel.*

What that was he was yet to determine, but it was there. Niggling and niggling at him like a persistent itch he couldn't scratch, turning to a burning, turning to an ache. *Had always been there but he had refused to give it a name, building and building until he could no longer ignore the truth of it.* And currently it was manifesting as panic.

Inconsequential mortal Will Graham had reached inside the core of his muted being and done something he thought impossible, and it was...

... *terrifying* amazing ***wonderful*** hateful *sickening* ***toolate*** ...

The memory of their shared dream loomed in his mind like a siren, and the sight of the red barn, the oak tree. He knew where Will Graham was waiting. He had known it all along, and was only now deciding whether to acknowledge it.

In the cramped and noisy cab of Brian Zeller's car, Hannibal Lecter did something he had not done for an age; he made a rash decision.

Eyes opened cautiously, blinking.

He didn't remember...closing his eyes. He didn't remember...where he was. He didn't remember...how he got here.

This place. *All around him like a safety blanket was familiar ground.* He was in the clearing near his house in Wolftrap, a sacred spot he had nurtured for many years. The smells and sounds and sight of it was like a bandage on a gushing wound. Will felt a tear slip from his eye in fluttering relief. Was this...real?

R–E–A–L–I–T–Y?

Was this the truth?

T–R–U–T–H?

Had everything else been a lie, a distortion, a hallucination on the precipice of death? Around him the wild grasses sparkled in the moonlight, crisp with frost and snow, while the trees stood tall in an imposing ring, sentinel-like.

His fragile, scared mind leapt at the prosaic setting, begging for this reality to be the truth. But part of him knew that nothing was as it seemed. *Hallucinations are prevalent in the dying* , he tried to tell himself . He had already experienced one, and now here was another come to continue the charade.

Crack.

Rip.

As if realising his acceptance of the fairy tale, things began to change.

The ground beneath his feet began to quiver, and then rumble, then tip and shake as in an earthquake, mulch and pinecones and ferns quaking and jumping like sand on a drumskin. Mice and skunks and foxes and deer were running and leaping between the trees, desperate to escape as they yipped and squealed, scurrying past him like a river flowing.

Will watched in horror as the great oak tree at the head of the clearing swayed, tilting with a horrendous groan as if to fall, branches snapping and falling to the ground, cracking apart like gunshots. And then suddenly it stopped with an unnatural jolt, leaves jostling with the sound of a thousand waves breaking on a stony shore. He shouted an involuntary sound of fear and fell to a crouch, hands up to protect his head as debris rained down. Staring up through his fingers Will couldn't tear his eyes away as the tree began to lift back towards its original position, creaking as if to split. He watched in awe as leaves rained down like snowflakes, and the ground beneath the tree began to erupt.

The earth broke, soil running like water, *liquefaction,* and from its womb birthed a thing which should not be seen by human eyes. And yet it was, as he observed it, and his mind twisted and broke in order to make space for its existence.

Will Graham stared, stuck to the spot, as it squirmed and hauled itself from the dirt. The immense head came first with the oak riding atop it like twisted antlers as they were one, joined, as if it had always been there just beneath the soil, waiting.

THE GREAT STAG'S HEAD LOOMED ABOVE HIM LIKE AN OMEN, AN ICON AGAINST THE FULL MOON. And then...

...for a moment, a surreal moment, there was peace. No more sound, no more riot, no more madness. Just the wind and the creaking of the forest. Will tried to focus, hands shaking, but it was difficult. *He felt as if he were looking backwards into the past, but he was stuck in the present* . When it moved, its movements were endowed with the heavy grandeur only huge entities possessed, slow and ponderous and terrifying. It lifted its brutal head towards the heavens and sent a call skywards, a sound that fed through his flesh and imprinted itself upon the core of his being. The cry was deafening, explosive. Will felt rent by it.

It barely seemed to touch his reality, instead he heard it as if from a time long past, or a future not yet seen; the sound was not truly real, not physical, but the braying whine as of a stag in the night appeared in his mind and sent him to his knees. Unfamiliar and yet familiar, as if resonating with every fibre of his existence even as the unnaturalness of it threatened to shake him apart. It felt as if

every nerve in his body were erupting at once, only to be reformed, again and again. As if he were experiencing being destroyed and remade, *destroyed and remade...*

And Will Graham was torn apart and put back together again, in order to accommodate for the **truth.**

Slowly, *slowly,* **THE STAG** crumpled down to the ground, like a vast building being demolished it fell with that *heavy grandeur*. The sound was calamitous but seductive in its awesome power. The air itself was displaced by its bulk, a gust like a hurricane lifting leaves and debris into the air to whip and spin; Will shielded himself but was bowled over regardless. As the air pressed from his lungs he choked, lying on his side as he covered his eyes. Felt the ground quiver as **IT** came to rest. Eventually, after what could have been an age, *what could have been forever,* it finally settled its humungous head against the ground.

Flesh without skin sat steaming in the cold night air, bones exposed and glistening, wet with uberous fluid. *The skull of a great stag, as if fallen freshly killed from the hunter's wall.* Its teeth sat like rows of ivory reliefs, yellowed with age. In the great, round socket sat a gigantic eyeball, completely white like the moon coming out from behind the clouds. And yet as it rolled to face him it revealed itself as black, utterly black, a void. Multiple iris's traversed its mucilaginous surface until each and every one focused in, pinpointed, staring directly at him.

He did not move. *Could not move.* From below the eye the grinning rows of exposed teeth on the gory skull wrenched open, making the cartilage snap and crack, bones popping and the hissing sound of breath escaping along with a milky cloud of steamy exhalation. Will wished he could cry out, scream, *anything* , but all rationale was lost.

All he could do was witness the madness before him and endure.

Traffic was a nightmare out here near the edges of town. When Beverly Katz checked the radio, the traffic update droned on about some crash on a nearby i-road. Now she was suffering the onslaught of cars escaping the chaos. Rolling down her window only did so much to alleviate the sense of muggy, uncomfortable, *trapped.*

"Get it together," she muttered as she eventually crawled to the intersection, managing to edge around the two cars ahead and squeeze round them, "thank christ."

At the very least it was calmer out here, in the suburbs. The traffic thinned, and the sounds of the city died away, the air became sweeter and less drenched in fumes. The grass verges grew long and wild, and the trees were tall and strong. There were birds in the sky. It was almost peaceful...if she'd allowed it to be.

Will missing, Will hurt, Will dead.

There was no time to be calm.

Eventually the GPS informed her that she needed to make a left, then another, and then suddenly, after forty minutes driving, she was where she was supposed to be. The subtle sign strapped to a tall Scots pine trunk by a large wooden gate read:

Maryland Coven
Ní féidir ach le cairde dul isteach

The words meant nothing to her, and yet somehow gave her pause. In the end Beverly decided not to second guess herself as she leaned out to press for entry at the gate. However, on looking she couldn't find an intercom, a buzzer, anything. While she stood there, searching, there was a click and suddenly the gate began to trundle open. Licking her lips Beverly felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. She hurried back into her car and, taking a breath, drove inside.

The Maryland Coven's building wasn't what she had expected. It was long and low, a bungalow stretching back into the compound like a snake, roof tiled in brown, walls washed in beige. It smacked of old fashioned, seventies. Around its walls were well established plants and bushes, all growing green and verdant, flowering despite the winter snow. It came across more like a refurbished community centre than a wiccan headquarters. Though Bev would be the first to admit she had no idea what a Practitioner's HQ should look like.

Parking closest to the door, she pulled up the handbrake and stepped out, reporting in her position to Quantico, and making sure she had her firearm in place. *For whatever use it would be, should anything go down.* Sniffing the cool air, she walked forwards and reached for the door...

...when suddenly it opened before she could touch the handle, and past her head flew a large, sleek black bird, so close that she could feel the feathers tickle her neck. Beverly would admit, even if a little red faced, that despite all her training she cursed aloud and ducked out of the way.

"Shit!" Bev cleared her throat and swallowed, standing back up from a crouch, "I mean...apologies, you, ah, your...bird startled me."

"Oh don't worry darlin', she doesn't bite."

The woman was maybe four-foot-two, four-three at a push, in her seventies at least, diminutive but somehow impressive nonetheless. Long white blonde hair down to her waist, and eyes clouded with glaucoma, wearing the stereotypical wiccan robes in black, and with a very large crow perched on her shoulder, preening its feathers absently. She was staring off into the distance with a soft smile on her wizened face.

"I'm sorry if we scared you," the woman said, accent deeply southern, "Jasper always comes in around now for feeding. Isn't that right sweetie," she cooed at the bird, which cawed harshly, stretching out its neck to allow the woman to scratch under its chin.

"Right," Beverly said, unsure of how to react, "that's ok. Um. I'm Beverly Katz, I'm with the FBI," she pulled out her badge and flashed it, though the woman didn't seem to be looking, "I'm here about Will Graham..."

The change was sudden and drastic, enough that it was difficult to ignore. The woman, who had been so far seemed rather featherbrained, suddenly lost the smile, unseeing eyes sharpening, each one trained directly onto Bev. The crow, even, had similarly focused its stare.

"What about Will Graham?" she said sternly.

"I'm afraid I can't talk about an ongoing investigation, I just wanted to know if you have any information about him or his whereabouts, or on Hannah Robicheaux..." Beverly tried her best to be diplomatic, which slipped away when she heard footsteps approaching from behind and turned; blinking, for a moment she thought she was seeing double. Another old woman stood behind her holding a walking stick, identical to the first in every way, except for the large bird perched on her shoulder: not a crow, but a magpie.

“Emeline?” the first woman said sagely, “Something tells me our sister’s got herself in a scrap of trouble.”

A soft feeling, almost like serenity, began to descend across his limbs, his mind, his being. It wrapped him up like cotton wool, deadening the *fear, terror, confusion, malice.* Will wished he could summon his survival instincts, try to fight against it, but it was useless. His cowering body stood without his consent and walked through the tranquilized air as if pulled on strings.

By the time he was close enough to see the texture of the torn muscles, the slick oil-like sheen across the bone, he barely even remembered standing up, much less why he had approached the vile beast in the first place. But through the numb acceptance, through the understanding that this was neither a dream nor a hallucination and the desperate wish that it was simply untrue...there was a memory. There was a *familiarity.*

“I have,” Will frowned as his feet carried him forwards like a drunken man staggering towards the cliff edge, “seen you,” hand reaching up tentatively, “before.”

The memory was weak but it found its mark *: the swampy feel of the Louisiana summer night time, bathing his skin. He’d had the dream again. It had called him and he had awoken. He’d followed the summons out into the darkness, into the woods. Up over the small stream and through the trees, his young feet had led him and his young eyes had observed without judgement or fear. Smiling, he had giggled and reached up to touch the soft feather-fur of the deer-like creature as it gazed down at him with its great eyes, multiple irises skimming their surface like some demented insect.*

Only when he’d heard someone coming had he given pause, turning to see Hannah scramble into view, her eyes filled with sorrow and disgust.

“Not again,” he heard her say; when Will turned around the creature was gone.

“No,” he heard his young voice saying as Hannah ran forwards and grabbed him, leading him away even as he fought her, “no," as he was dragged away and he flailed and screamed abrasively, “No, no, no!”

Real. It had all been real. Not a misremembered childhood memory, not a dream, not a nightmare. *Real.*

“I know...you,” he breathed out, feeling displaced as he experienced the past and yet was also here in the present simultaneously; *time appeared to have no meaning here.*

He realised too late that his outstretched hand was headed directly for the large, wet eyeball of the creature; *no time to try and change the will of something so unknowable* . Will gagged and shivered as his palm came into contact with the thick mucilaginous surface. His fingers clenched involuntarily, digging into the ball like he was trying to pull apart frozen gelatine.

“Jesus, oh jesus *fuck* ,” he sobbed, “please. I don’t want...to understand..!"

But **IT** was not capable of understanding the plea, or perhaps not capable of understanding him at all. Or perhaps simply unable or unwilling to care. Will watched in horror as the forest around them trembled, and beneath his feet a familiar sight became etched into the ground. *The sigil that had been haunting him, glowing as it slowly coalesced into the single rune that had become his fate: ANNEAL.*

His hand began to slide further inside the sunken eyeball, until Will realised with horror that he was not falling forwards but rather being sucked in, "Let me go," he screamed, "Let me *go!"*

He struggled, trying to push against the slick with his other hand only to find that one too stuck fast. The eye stared at him as it devoured him, and his screams were silenced as his face was pressed tight against the slimy surface and enveloped. The forest dimmed and the sun was put out like a candle, until the world around them was swallowed in darkness. And then the voice from beyond spoke...

T-R-U-T-H

Alana had been chasing them on foot for fifteen minutes and was only now realising that she would have to admit how unfit she really was. The cold air burned on the way in, and ached on the way out. Her chest felt as if it were about to burst.

“Slow...down, for fuck’s...sake,” she huffed out, while leaning against the nearest tree; the chill bark bit into her palm while she listened to the crunch of leaves beneath paws, the yaps and growls rushing off ahead, “bloody *dogs* .”

Pulling out her phone she brought up the app and watched the tracker dots moving away from her position while her mind spun. *Just keep moving,* she thought as her heavy feet dragged through the underbrush, hands swatting away branches and errant stems on leggy bushes, *just keep going. God I hope I’m right about all this.* At times she tried to motivate herself with thoughts of what would happen if she didn’t keep going, but those tended not to last too long. She was already upset enough.

When she heard the first bark, her heart leapt. Alana rushed towards the sound as fast as she could manage, hurrying down a low bank and wading across a small shallow stream. Ignoring the freezing water that gushed into her right boot, she scrambled up the other side, through the thick ferns, before rushing towards the growing yelps and barks and snarls and...

...suddenly the dense forest melted away, and she was at the edge of a large clearing. The sky was bright despite the clouds, making the snow effervescent. The space was thick with vegetation, huge ferns taller than she was sprang from the earth in scattered patterns, half formed mounds of dirt protruded from the earth as if some huge, demented mole had been burrowing, and trees had been overturned, uprooted or broken altogether. It was a bizarre and frightening sight, as if a giant had crashed through the area and left devastation in its wake.

And at the head of the clearing, opposite to where she stood, there danced dozens of eager and familiar paws. Will Graham’s pack were fitfully barking and digging, some more effectively than others. Some were spinning in place. Some were jumping and scratching at the trunk of a great oak that sat proudly above their dig site and, truthfully, Alana couldn’t blame them.

“Oh my *god* ,” Alana breathed out with what little she could spare.

The tree was swaying, though there was no wind. Each branch appeared to have been twined and twisted with the others, creating a bonsai-like effect, and yet there was no visible rope or twine to keep them that way, and to do so would have taken such work and effort that she couldn’t imagine it. The tree had been bifurcated from the central trunk into two spiky, woven sides. It was almost excruciating to look at, the tree groaning as if fighting against its bonds. As Alana hobbled across

the clearing towards the dogs she couldn't keep her eyes from the tortured tree. *It's almost like...antlers,* she thought with a chill across her spine.

All across the clearing there were huge ferns sprouted from the dirt, ancient gnarled trees sporting tiny round pine cones, the roots of the trees were huge and twisting up through the ground. She climbed across as best she could until she reached the dogs, yelping and howling and digging at the ground. Hurrying, Alana pushed her fear down as she approached the tree.

"What is it?" she asked the dogs futilely, "Where's Will? Come on you mutts, where is..?"

And it dawned, suddenly and sickeningly. *The dogs digging in the disturbed earth,* "Oh my god," she breathed out, throwing herself down to her knees, ignoring the pain as she joined paws and claws and began to dig, "oh my god Will! Will can you hear me!? I'm here! I'm here!"

She didn't know where the strength came from. Alana felt like someone from the stories you read in the tabloids, ' *Mother lifts car to save baby'* . She was pulling up handfuls and handfuls, and armfuls and armfuls, and next to her Lenny the pitbull was furiously digging, and the other dogs around the, *call it what it is Alana,* grave site were doing the same. She didn't even know how long it took, but suddenly she was touching something solid beneath the earth, solid and smooth, and she was breathing harshly, cold air hurting her lungs, but she dug and the dogs dug, and soon she was wiping away earth from a shiny surface and, *oh god, oh my god it's a coffin oh god* , and she felt her chest cramp and she was choking out tears that she didn't even realise were falling.

"Will? Will! I'm getting you out. I'm getting you out, ok?" she couldn't stop talking, coughing out words as she struggled to find the latch, hands and nails caked in filth, clothes smeared, hair falling into her eyes, "Will? Will please can you hear me!"

And then suddenly, something caught her eye. Movement. Alana forced herself up onto her forearms, looking across the clearing. She squinted, confused. With the light-headedness and aching limbs and the strange setting, for a moment Alana thought she was seeing things.

"Hannah?" she asked herself as she watched the little old woman walking towards her across the clearing, "Is that...you? Hannah?" she struggled up, wobbly on her feet, " *Hannah?* " and she felt sudden relief, "thank god, Hannah! I've found him, it's Will, I've found him!"

It was almost more difficult to open the lid than it was to dig. Her adrenaline high was running low, her arms ached, her chest ached, her legs ached. She felt woozy and shaky, breathing hoarse, but nothing stopped her. Nothing would ever stop her when Will was in danger. Nothing. It was heavy and still half covered in earth but Alana managed to get it open a touch, and then get her fingers in, and then put her feet down and *lift!* She screamed as she pulled up with everything she had left, the dogs barking and spinning in place and jumping around her. And the lid lifted and the world swayed and the earth tumbled away.

But then she looked down into the hole she had dug, and she saw Will Graham pale, she saw him unmoving, she saw him bruised, she saw him covered in blood. She felt her hand go to her mouth.

"Jesus, Will!" she cried out.

The hand at her shoulder was like a balm. She looked to Hannah Robicheaux and wept, falling to her knees.

"Oh god he's dead isn't he," she rushed out.

“No, not yet,” Hannah said sagely, “not yet my dear.”

“Oh thank god,” Alana coughed out, “I’ll call,” she fished in her pocket for her phone, trying her best to wipe away the dirt on her hands, “I’ll call for an ambulance, a helicopter. Please, Hannah, isn’t there anything you can do?”

When she thought back to that moment later in her life, it would be difficult to recall. Fuzzy, like static. She would remember the panic and the cold, she would remember smell of the dog’s wet fur, she would remember Will looking at death’s door. But no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to remember the words Hannah spoke to her that made her drop to the ground like a stone, unconscious.

“My poor baby,” Hannah said stonily as she left Alana Bloom insensible on the ground, greeting the dogs as they came to sniff at her, climbing carefully over the disturbed piles of dirt and earth before lowering herself down to the coffin with difficulty, “my sweet boy, what have they done to you?”

She could feel it from here, *had been able to feel it when it happened* . All of the traps she had built with her coven of sisters, intricate traps in Will’s mind to keep the darkness from reaching his consciousness, *tainting his skin* , they were gone. All gone, snapped and broken. Now, here, he was left as nothing but a bloody mess, barely holding on to life, *hanging from the precipice.*

It was almost impossible to believe she was looking at the same boy she had raised. *Bright eyed, fiercely intelligent, always looking to understand that which could not be understood.* Now reduced to nothing but dying flesh. Part of her wished she could at least show grief, but the other part knew that there was no room for that. Not here. Not with what she still had to do. As soon as she shed a tear, Hannah knew that she would never be able to go through with it.

“I should have told you the truth,” she whispered, kneeling down on either side of Will’s chest, pulling the ritual dagger from her clothes, “I should have done better by you. I’m sorry, Will. I’m sorry Hannah, my sister. I’m sorry.”

Then she saw him, and she paused. There, standing at the edge of the clearing, **was him** . Hannah lifted her head, staring across the distance between them, and locked eyes. It was happenstance, or perhaps destiny, that he be here to see her do it. Be here to witness the end of it just as he was there at the beginning of all this; *Lecter.* And she could tell from his face that he was stunned, panicked, knowing there was no way to stop her, no way to reach her in time.

“Tá sé críochnaithe,” Hannah said, lifting the knife.

Only it never fell.

Beaten at his own game . It wasn’t often that Hannibal felt the sting of it. Oftentimes he enjoyed the sensation. It added a little spice to his sometimes monotonous existence. He enjoyed the flare of events going awry, of people being unpredictable. Made things interesting.

Except, in this one very specific case. Bedelia had been the first, Zeller the second, and now...

“ *You* ,” he breathed out as he looked across the clearing, to beneath the huge oak twisted and screeching.

Robicheaux looked miserably triumphant, as she should. Because Hannibal knew there was no way to reach her before she'd used the dagger in her hands. No way to reach Will, no way to stop this. None. At that moment he regretted ordering Zeller to stay at the car and not interfere.

There was nothing he could do.

Yet it didn't stop him from running. Odd to feel it, really, this sense of fighting futility. *Why run if you know you can't stop it?* He knew. He knew why, but it still stung to know he was so uselessly enthralled. *His feet kicked up the snow as he ran.* It had all been for nothing. *He leaned forwards to gain momentum.* He would have to start again, and even then he might never be able to replicate the exact perameters that had created this perfect being. *Head down.* This could be it.

The end.

Yet when he reached the dogs, the unconscious form of Alana Bloom, Robicheaux's knife had been halted in its descent, and Will...

Hannibal found that he was not greeted with the finality he had feared. Instead, there was a new fear, another unknown, another problem to be solved.

Hannah let out a cry as she was disarmed, her wrists squeezed until she let go, and then was thrown from the grave with impressive force, her geriatric frame tumbling across the clearing. Hannibal watched, narrow eyed, as Will Graham stood unnaturally from the coffin. His clothes were sodden with blood, his skin pale, but his eyes were black. Black as they had been that morning, only now multiple irises swarmed across the surface, swivelling, watching everything.

"Will?" he asked cautiously, knowing it was foolish, *and yet hope persisted.*

A smile, so small and soft he almost missed it, was the reply. As Will climbed gracefully from the hole, his pack of mutts cowered before him, whining, rolling over with their tails between their legs. Hannibal wished he could back away, but something held him tightly in place. As the creature approached, Hannibal felt an immense pressure across his form as he was forced to his knees. Gritting his teeth, he tried to fight but it was impossible. As the creature approached, Hannibal felt its presence deepen, felt the familiar call, and knew it for what it was.

Knew that this was happening now, not as he had planned it, not with any safeguards in place. All of his machinations had gone completely to waste, he had no leverage, no aces left to play. Here, before him, was the embodiment of the god that had swallowed his life and taken his sister from him, and he was nothing but an insect in its presence.

As he knelt, head down, slowly and dangerously a hand slipped across his hair, thumb stroking as if comforting a scared animal.

"Herre," he whispered with reverent resentment.

It did not speak, but the words ' ***Y-O-U-H-A-V-E-D-O-N-E-W-E-L-L*** ' appeared in his mind as if they had always been there. It was unpleasant, as always, but he bore it. The hand stayed put, an unspoken threat against his skull.

Hannibal knew he should remain calm and be respectful, but the adrenaline in his system made him jumpy and the thought of missing this opportunity made his stomach turn, and before he knew it was asking, "Snälla, min syster..."

The fingers tightened suddenly, gripping his hair painfully. Hannibal stiffened, eyes closing. ‘ ***I-K-N-O-W-Y-O-U-R-P-L-A-N-S-F-O-R-M-E*** ’ it said; unable to give tone to its words, Hannibal inferred the anger from its violent actions. He stayed very still. *Of course it knows,* he thought to himself, *this wasn’t supposed to happen like this, it was...* then he heard it.

A sound, far off but growing closer, closer. A very distinct sound. *Helicopter.* Louder, louder, louder, *there!* He felt the surprise in his system, leaching through from the creature standing above him. From all his research Hannibal knew that even a god as ancient as this was compromised while controlling a human form. While wearing Will Graham’s skin, and in that moment of surprise, its hold over him lapsed, *just for a split second.* It took everything he had, every ounce of strength he still possessed, but he managed to look up. Overhead a large red helicopter flew into sight above the clearing, and, quick as a flash, Hannibal dropped his glamour, reached up and grabbed Will’s hand.

The creature looked down, furious, but by then it was too late. Time seemed to stand still, caught in a frame of reality. With no time, no energy, no plan, no luck, Hannibal Lecter bet his existence on one last well crafted lure.

Will, he said candidly, *I want to tell you the truth.*

Chapter End Notes

Ní féidir ach le cairde dul isteach - Only friends can enter

Tá sé críochnaithe - It is finished

Herre - Master

Snälla, min syster... - Please, my sister...

Narcissus Petals

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the long wait on this chapter, there's been a lot going on IRL! I hope it was worth the wait, and I'm going to try my best to keep writing more consistently on this one now I have more time to write. Thanks again to everyone for the support for this story, it really makes my day to see people enjoying it :)

Thought free and inky eyed, he floated through nothingness; *a petal on the river*. Time seemed to flow both back and forth, swelling around him maelstrom-like. Memory of his own and memory of others and *memory of everything* tried desperately to invade what little consciousness remained.

Ink through water.

Twining and combining.

Becoming.

Everything Will Graham had experienced throughout his life seemed utterly short and inconsequential when faced with the eternity of the void. A history of forever, stretching back, back, back…

Inertia.

Everything slowed.

Stopped.

Nothing.

And then, a *spark*.

A single, small bright light appeared before him. His first though, childlike, was to reach out and touch it. And so he did.

The reaction was unutterable. One moment there was nothing but the dark mass of matter, and then suddenly there was *something*.

Stillness became movement. Movement became friction. Friction became heat, and light, and electrical impulses, and momentum and….

He was sent back through boiling clouds of gas, luminous and transient, through the birthing of nebulas where somnolent stars grew like flies in a spider’s web, through the spiraling of galaxies forming, crashing, merging, of black holes emerging like maws ready to feed, through hot rock and gas balling through gravity’s thrall, becoming planets, through solar systems forming, through meteors landing, through life, through death.

Through from the start to the end, and back again. *The cycle of time wound round like a spring, loosening and tightening, over and over, forever.*

Somewhere, somehow, Will Graham knew his mind was shattering; *a teacup fell from hands ready to drop it, and hope it could possibly someday reverse itself and come back together.*

When the touch came, so simple and firm, at first he didn't understand it. It seemed inconsequential. But as it persisted, as a probing at his mind began, as he was shaken free from this wide awake nightmare...a hand. There was a hand. There was a hand in his and…he looked down.

"Will," a familiar face sat before him, watching him with a calm he couldn't fathom, "I want to tell you the truth."

The crisp white country snow of winter was turning to grey, brown slush in the city streets. Normally Jimmy wouldn't care, he tended to sit winter out in a lab or a library, or both, studying with his head so far down a semiology index that most people forgot he was even there. And yet, ever since he'd taken up Crawford's irresistible offer things had become a little more practical.

He didn't see the puddle as he stepped out of the SUV, sinking his right foot down deep into the swampy freezing mess with a hiss of disgust. *Typical*, was all he could think. This was exactly why he hated the outdoors. Stepping up onto the pavement he shook his lamentable foot and the sodden trousers above it; damn but he missed long straight corridors of linoleum and the rubber smell of the archives.

"You ok?" came the mousy voice of his attendant from behind him.

Jimmy turned with a strained smile for the small man and lied, "Sure, fine. Let's just get this over with before it gets dark."

The man he'd collected from the Registry, or he should say *Pyroadept,* had been unexpected. Barely five three, black hair and skin pale enough to seem ill, watery eyes big enough to make him appear far younger than he surely was. He had come highly recommended, so Jimmy couldn't help but feel guilty that he didn't entirely believe the man's credentials based on his appearance. It was very unscientific of himself to do so.

Not that the recommendation helped, if Jimmy was to be fair. Anything Registry came with a heavy helping of reciprocation; they gave nothing away for free. And yet, so far this adept had not shown any of the normal signs of a Registry pawn, *no arrogance, no smarminess, no false charm.* In fact he had been utterly self-effacing since Jimmy had picked him up from the steps at the Registry, like a little boy waiting for his parents at school.

It was only as Jimmy walked beside the *Pyro,* up the stairs to the burnt out husk of the first arson case Will had discovered, that he guiltily realised he'd completely forgotten the man's name. *Clarence..? Clancey..?*...Jimmy gave up.

"I'd like to go first," the *Pyro* said, avoiding eye contact; Jimmy gave a slight shrug and flashed his eyebrows, "thank you."

'Going first' as the *Pyro* put it seemed arbitrary to Jimmy. The jagged mess of burnt out wood and mortar before them looked more like a bombsite than the home it had once been. And yet the *Pyro*

still entered through the, bizarrely still recognizable, gap where the front door would have been. It was oddly respectful. Jimmy followed his example.

“So should I..?” Jimmy felt a little out of his depth, “…you know, do you need anything?”

“Not really,” the *Pyro* sniffed, pulling out a small, worn tin and thumbing it open. Jimmy watched with interest; he had only ever seen *Pyros* work on video footage, never in the flesh, “honestly I’m surprised they didn’t call us out for a cursory domiciliary check, it’s not difficult to pick up that there’s been magic here.”

“Really?” Jimmy was taken aback.

“Mmm, it’s…” the man hummed, taking out a small piece of rock from the tin and holding it in his hand; from the smell, Jimmy could tell it was sulphureous. When Jimmy looked back to the *Pyro’s* face it was screwed up a little uncomfortably, “it’s…itchy,” he seemed to struggle to explain, giving up with a shake of the head, “I’ll start now. Please don’t interrupt me when I’m searching for the source.”

“Ok,” Jimmy said nodding, letting out a short unimpressive laugh to cover his nerves.

Still, despite his unease, he couldn’t quell his scientist’s curiosity. Ever since he’d been a child he’d been unerringly curious, like the cat. *Curiosity killed it*, Jimmy thought as he watched the small stone in the man’s hand begin to lick with the beginnings of a flame, like the first coal on a barbeque, *but satisfaction brought it back.* They started, then stopped, then started again. Jimmy followed the *Pyro* from a bit closer than a safe distance as he wended his way through the rubble, seeming to read the signs that the fire in his palm spoke, and knew that there was no venture without risk. He might as well go all in.

It was only as he realised they had stopped and hadn’t started to move again for over a minute that Jimmy dared to do the thing he said he wouldn’t do; *interrupt.*

“Everything ok..?” again he kicked himself for forgetting the Pyro’s name, “…uh, excuse me?”

Stepping around the slight man Jimmy got a look at his face. He hadn’t thought it possible for the man to get paler, and yet it seemed to have happened. His dark hair stuck out at strange angles, and his wide eyes were fixed on the floor at a large hunk of melted glass with nothing short of fury, or fear, it was difficult to tell. Jimmy thought he might have heard the man mutter something, *fiend fire maybe?*

Before Jimmy could ask again, the man bent down and began feeling delicately along the wet ground.

“Are you looking for some..?” he started.

“Shh!” was all he received in return.

After another moment the man made a small sound of vindication and picked up a shard of maybe metal? It was utterly charred with soot. Jimmy frowned, moving in closer, and watched as the *Pyro* used the small flame in his palm to burn away the soot, muttering under his breath the entire time. And then there was a shard of metal in the Pyros hand, no wait it was shining but reflective; *a shard from a mirror!*

“Holy cow,” Jimmy grinned as the *Pyro* peered into the shard, “that’s really something! How’s that work..?”

The sudden shout was unexpected and loud and fearful, and made Jimmy start badly, holding his chest. The *Pyro* dropped the shard and lunged backwards, falling onto his side and pushing away, face contorted. Jimmy was stunned, but quickly recovered. He’d seen enough traumatized people in his life that he felt adept at dealing with at least one more.

“Hey! *Hey*, it’s alright,” Jimmy hunkered down beside him, careful not to touch the shaking man; the man’s eyes were everywhere, up and down, flicking around like a fly in a jar, “hey, look at me,” Jimmy tried, “at me, not at that thing, at me. Right, yes, that’s it.”

And he almost regretted his confidence in dealing with trauma, because when the *Pyro* finally caught his stare it was intense enough to burn.

“Fiend fire,” the *Pyro’s* voice was strained, “they used fiend fire. This wasn’t a simple arson, it was deliberate, they wanted this place and everyone in it wiped off the face of the earth,” he struggled to his feet, keeping away from the shard and the lump of hardened glass that Jimmy was realizing now to be all that was left of the rest of the mirror, “you said there were other arson sites?” Jimmy nodded, “Find someone else, I won’t go to them!”

Jimmy hesitated as the *Pyro* turned to leave, walking with purpose. Hesitating only a moment, Jimmy grabbed the mirror shard in an evidence bag and hurried after the man, despite wanting nothing more than to make him stay and tell him more about what he had discovered. Instead, he gave in. *Maybe I have a heart after all*, Jimmy thought begrudgingly. Still, as they drove back to the Registry steps he finally remembered something and couldn’t help but push for more.

“It’s Cleveland, right?” Jimmy said.

The Pyro looked at him as if no one had ever remembered his name before, “Uh…yes?”

“Look, I’m not going to make you go to any of the other sites, but I really can’t come back empty handed. This case we’re working, it’s not exactly run of the mill, so I get why this might have you shaken. It has us all shaken. But, you see I have a colleague who’s in trouble, missing, and anything you can tell me? It would be a great help. Might even save a life.”

Cleveland sniffed, looking uncomfortable, but seemed to at last make a decision, “I…don’t get involved with witch fires. They give us a bad rep, and fiend fire isn’t to be toyed with. It turns bones to ash and doesn’t go out until its purpose is fulfilled.”

“But that wasn’t what made you upset, surely?”

Cleveland shook his head, “No, I…that mirror, melted on the floor? That was the flash point. With that sort of spell you need to attach it to an object. A source. The mirror was it, and that shard that didn’t burn? It…held onto the essence of the witch that cursed it. I got a name, just a first name. Tobias? I’m sure it was Tobias. But there was something else there behind that name, an image, something awful. I don’t…I can’t…” Cleveland blinked rapidly and huddled down into the passenger seat; Jimmy turned on the heating and felt fatherly enough to pat the *Pyro* on the shoulder.

“It’s ok,” Jimmy said, even though it clearly was not, “everything will be ok. Let’s get you a hot cup of coffee before you head back, huh?”

He counted the slight tick at the corner of Cleveland's mouth as a win, even though he still held that haunted stare. *Jimmy just hoped that wherever Will was, he wasn't dealing with the thing in the mirror.*

There was wind in his hair, tumbling the curls around like long grass. It was cold, *a moist cold, clammy, making the chill all the worse.* Taking a deep breath in he tasted salt and drowsiness…*sea air*. It plumed and sparkled like waves crashing. He could hear it, far below, water surging and moving, hushing and shushing.

Blinking, Will Graham looked around, part of him amazed that he was seeing anything at all, the rest of him disbelieving of all that was shown.

A clifftop. He was stood atop a clifftop, staring out at the ocean. It was a cloudy day, grey and resolute. He was huddled in his familiar clothes, his jeans and flannel shirt and heavy winter jacket. He felt almost…alive. *Fucking alive, like he'd believe it.* At this point he felt like a fraying piece of string being played with by a cosmic kitten, soon to unravel. This sudden landscape merely prolonged the inevitable, he was sure.

Dying, he thought he heard the word echo in his own voice, *somewhere else, somewhere real, you're dying.*

The outside world remained constant. Birds flew in the sky, calling long and bleating; *seagulls.* The upward draught of air from the cliff caught their wings, allowing them to hang lazily there. Though, if he looked closer, their wings were distinctly black and white, more like a magpie's.

Turning his head, Will looked behind him to see a house about a hundred feet away, a large house, *something familiar about the house*, a grand manor snuggled away at the edge of a forest. Wrapping his arms around himself he tried to take a step back from the cliff-edge.

Then *the hand*. The hand that had brought him here, the hand that had pulled him from the brine of the universe…the hand that now grabbed his arms tightly and forced him to stay put. Slowly, anxiously, Will looked to his right.

"Hannibal..?" he muttered, unsure whether this was just bait or, hope beyond hope, that it could be real…

"Do you recognize this place?" Hannibal asked as if they were already mid-conversation, regarding him calmly, "Will?"

"I-I don't know," Will stammered, frowning, "Shit, Hannibal, what the hell is going on, are we really here or..?"

"Answer the question," Hannibal said firmly, a slight hint of urgency in his stare.

Will swallowed, taking a breath, "I think so…something's familiar at least."

"That is good. The familiarity will hold you to this spot," Hannibal nodded, looking relieved.

"Wait…" he thought as his faculties slowly returned, "why am I here? Are you…are you real?" Hannibal didn't seem to entertain the notion; when Will made to reach out, *touch*, Hannibal didn't stop him. Fingertips met the wool of his suit, warmed by body heat, and Will felt his face crumple

with emotion. He reigned the reaction in, taking a shaky breath, “I uh…I thought that…” Will shook his head and looked away, hand dropping down between them.

“I told you that I would find you,” Hannibal seemed to be smiling, but his eyes were fraught no matter how well he tried to hide it.

“Yeah,” Will nodded, trying his best to feel relief, but there was something stopping him, “How *did* you find me?”

The hesitation was short, but it was there, “I recognized the barn in your dream,” Hannibal’s words were slick but unreliable; he moved on quickly, “it is important that you have a connection to this place.”

“But I’ve never been here before,” Will admitted, feeling suddenly antsy that he was stood so close to the cliff edge; *the air plumed up, roughing his hair, and the vertigo made him sway*. But Hannibal’s hand was a constant anchor.

“I assure you, you have,” Hannibal said, sniffing, “just not as you would expect. This,” he said looking into Will’s eyes, “is where I grew up.”

“Where you…” Will’s eyes felt heavy lidded as he looked back at the manor house, “grew up…” *flashes of a dream, a dream of blood and fire*, “I’ve been here before.”

“Yes,” Hannibal whispered, “we both have, together.”

Jack Crawford felt like shit. It wasn’t exactly hard these days to feel every ache and pain in his body, considering the fatigue and the guilt and the constant stress. Taking a deep breath he tried to quell some of the anxiety, but it was as short lived as fuse paper. Rubbing at his eyes, he did his least favourite pastime: *waiting*. Waiting for all the orders and traces and feelers for information to come back with something tenable.

When the knock came he was so overjoyed he actually sprang up to answer the door. That it was Jimmy Price standing there was only marginally disappointing.

“Hi,” Price said, smiling his normal infuriating smile, “uh, can I come in?”

“Yeah, sure,” Crawford said with a sigh, gesturing for the man to enter.

Jimmy did so, sitting down primly despite his clearly wet trousers. Jack did the polite thing and also sat down, even though under the table he was bouncing on his heels.

“So, I went to the arson site with the Pyro,” Jimmy said, pulling out something in an evidence bag which he held gingerly by the top of the bag; he dumped it on Jack’s desk, “it was arson alright, but not the normal kind.”

“Meaning?” Jack asked, making to pick up the bag but Jimmy stopped him; Jack frowned.

“I wouldn’t touch it, just yet,” Jimmy looked uneasy, “not really sure how it works, but the Pyro was freaked out. He said it was fiend fire? Witch fire. Nasty stuff, burns anything to whatever level the caster desires.”

“Yeah, I know about it,” Jack muttered, frowning, “but why the hell would someone want to burn these houses down so hard? That kind of spell is notoriously tricky. Can backfire, turn on the caster.”

“Don’t know for sure, but my best guess is that Will was right. They were trying to hide some of their kills, ones that would have given clues to the identity of the killers or true motive of these killings.”

“Right,” Jack nodded, deflating, “but that doesn’t really get us anywhere…”

“Except!” Price interrupted, setting Crawford’s teeth on edge, “the Pyro also gave me a name.”

Jack sat up, fingers tight on the edge of the desk, “And you didn’t lead with this information why?”

“Well, I mean it wouldn’t have made much sense to just jump in half way through the story so…”

“Out with it!”

“Ok, ok, it was Tobias. The name he said was Tobias, I thought that would be useful as it’s an unusual name and…”

Jack didn’t wait to hear Price finish rambling. He was up and out of the room in a flash, hurrying to their case room where Beverly had studiously pinned up all of their suspects and their known associates. Jack stood in front of the board for the Hobbs family, cursing as he came away with *nothing*, moving on to the victims, becoming more agitated, moving on to Stammets and Buddish, *nothing*, in a panic moving on to the witch covens they had loosely associated with the case, running his finger down the lists of names until…

“Bingo!” Jack grinned like a cat with the cream, “Got you, you fucker!”

Just as Jimmy hurried into the room Jack was putting out an APB on Tobias Budge with the hopeful confidence of a drowning man who’d been thrown a life ring but still knew the sharks were circling underneath.

“Jack..!” Price looked agitated, holding a phone in his hand.

“Not now Price,” Jack said angrily.

“But it’s Brian! On the phone, he..!”

Almost without thinking Jack reached out and grabbed the phone from Price, startling him. He put the phone to his ear, “Goddamit Zeller you better have the explanation to end all explanations or I will make sure the Inspector General gets you alone in a sound proof cell!”

“Jack?” Zeller’s voice sounded winded, and dare he say it panicked, “you need to get out here. You need to get out here *right fucking now*! I found Will!”

His eyes were drawn back to the house, like a siren’s call. Will wasn’t sure if, for a split second, he wasn’t in control of himself, but with the chaos of his existence it was difficult to tell. However, it happened, suddenly he was staring at the house, his back to the cliff. The manor house stood vacant, a fossil preserved in time. *It tickled a memory, somewhere deep.* Will frowned, opening his mouth to talk when…

Movement, *far off.* A door opened, small and doll like on the manor's surface, and something crept out. Will felt his breath hitch. *Every nerve ending began to tingle and squirm.* Will stared at it, squinting.

"What is that?" he heard himself whisper.

"Something I wish I had told you of sooner," he heard Hannibal say.

"Some*thing*?" Will said suspiciously, "What the hell is this? You here to confess?"

"Are you to offer me redemption, Will?"

At first he took it as a jibe, but on looking at Hannibal's face the man seemed to take it more as a chance at retribution. He looked fervent, eyes slightly glassy. Will frowned, found his hand reaching up unbidden to touch, smoothing across Hannibal's cheek. The man closed his eyes and a single tear slipped from his lashes, dripping down to fall, creating a stream, a river, a waterfall…

The waterfall was their space. A place the faeries lived, or so mum told them in her bedtime stories. It was a beautiful place where none of the towns-folk liked to go, the rocks wet with water and moss, the pool deep and swirling with foam and the fish that lived beneath. Mischa liked to sit on the grassy bank and watch her brother splash and try to catch them, the roar of the water keeping their squeals of joy and play safe from listening ears. The whistle of the wind toyed with the leaves of the overhanging trees, lapping and caressing as it lifted up across the cliff and out over…

…it came back to Will as a gasp, a deep breath to fill lungs that felt empty. He panted desperately, hands clinging to Hannibal's heavy coat.

"What the fuck," he gasped, "what the hell is happening to me?"

"I told you," Hannibal's voice said from above, "I want to tell you the truth."

"I…" Will glanced to his right, at the house; *the something was creeping closer, taking shape,* "… don't think I want to know."

"My dear Will," he said, holding him close, *close, closer*, "there is nothing to fear," Hannibal brought Will close with strong arms, until his cheek was pressed against the soft suede of the coat, rubbing across the surface….

…the fawn's downy fur was soft underhand. It stood, nibbling the new spring grasses under the great oak. Hannibal was amazed that the creature would suffer their touch, but his sister merely smiled and beckoned him closer. Yet, at his approach the fawn skittered, ears up, leaping away through the trees. He looked at her, disappointed, but she merely smiled back beatifically…

…xfltls….

…T-R-…

…sjfln…

…U-T-H…

…the softness beneath his hand….was tainted by the slick of blood…as he stared in horror at the carcass of the fawn…and she smiled, reaching up to touch with hands slaked in red…

….pushing back Will stumbled, tripping, and fell. Panicking, he could feel the airy chasm of the cliff, his left arm flailing out into nothing but air. Grasping at the ground, Will rolled to his right and scrabbled until he knew he was safe from the drop. As he lay there, shaking, he couldn't help but look up through the grass and see…*it had come even closer, now discernible as a human shape*.

"This is your dream," Will managed to say, looking up at Hannibal from the ground, "isn't it."

Hannibal was frowning softly, as if trying to remember something but merely being given an answer they did not expect. Maroon eyes caught his.

"Dream," his face once more returned to its placid mill pond, "a laymen's term. I would have thought better of you."

"And I would have expected you not to avoid the question," Will said, staring pointedly.

"I am trying to show you…"

"There's something wrong with this place," Will interrupted, struggling to his knees, "can't you feel it? Can't you…see it?"

And as Hannibal turned to look at the approaching *something* he merely smiled, a fondness to his eyes, glassy, unperturbed. Will swallowed deep, a tightness in his chest as Hannibal reached down with a hand and grabbed his own, pulling Will up with an…

…excited hurry, keeping her little hand in his as they wove in and out of the people at the fair. The bakers had pulled out the tables from the Inn and were loading them up with loaves fresh from the oven. The apple harvest had been fermenting and cider flowed. The villagers were dancing in long white dresses, flowers in their hair. They stopped by the big open roasting pit, where wild pigs had been skinned and skewered and were cooking slowly over the coals. His sister clapped and bounced in time with the skin drums, smiling as he snagged a loose daffodil from the ground and threaded it through her curls…

….T

R….

….U

T….

….H

Screaming. They were all screaming, a deep horror resonant in the sound. He knew he shouldn't have brought her here, but she'd begged him, and mother and father had forbade them from leaving the house but…

Hannibal watched, eyes round and unknowing, as his sister danced in the viscera of the slaughtered spring dancers, her white dress stained red while the villagers fled in terror, screaming…

…the magpie's cries in the air sounded loud, their wings wide. Will watched them, trying desperately to reconcile the truth of this space. His heart was beating as if he'd run a mile. The sky rolled above, heavy clouds on the horizon. Reaching up he felt his own face, his hair.

“What is this?” he whispered to himself, “This isn’t...*jesus christ we’re…*”

“Things will be right,” Hannibal was saying, as a man would who wanted to convince himself of a truth that did not exist, “soon, you will see.”

“No, you don’t get it!” Wil barked out, scowling.

It was coming closer, the vague human form coalescing into a child, *or something childlike*. Will managed to scramble to his feet, looking around himself. The air was beginning to warp, subtly at first, but more as the *something* grew closer on its two feet. Will tried desperately to run, but there was no lateral movement in this space. Will tried to walk to his right, *nothing,* his left, *nothing.* The only way was towards the *thing*, or…

…Will peered over the cliff edge at the waves sculpting the jagged rocks below.

“You said you brought me here,” Will pulled back and looked Hannibal in the eyes, “to tell me the truth.”

Lecter watched him impassively.

“Tell me,” he said urgently.

“Will…” Hannibal smiled.

“Tell me, quickly!” Will grabbed his lapels, “There’s something wrong! This isn’t what you think!”

“Everything will be well,” Hannibal said, “the teacup will come back together, and I will…”

…feel the knife in his young hands as he raised it, the shock in his mother’s eyes short lived as he plunged it into her chest. His father, tangled in his sheets, had been next. His throat slit like the pigs at the abattoir. The blood was warm and viscous, coating everything. He walked from the room breathing shallowly. It had been the only way, killing them had been the only way. They would not take her away from him…

…..T…..R…..U….T….H….

…he watched in shock through the doorway as she stood at the bottom of the bed, her small placid smile in place…as his mother was torn apart by unseen hands…and his father lifted into the air and thrown back, impaled on the proud rack of antlers upon the wall…blood fell like rain, and she smiled at him, blood spattered across her young face….

“No one *will* take *me* away *from* you, *brother.”*

Everything came to a halt. *Stopped*. No calling of birds, no sound of wind. *Muted.*

Will looked to his right, to see it standing there. *Right there* beside them. He held onto Hannibal, knuckles white.

“Fucking *hell*,” Will whispered past lips almost numb with fear.

It was everything, and nothing. It was there and here. It was past and future. It was…

A young girl and *a young woman* and *an old lady* and…

It seemed to shift as your eyes perceived it, like looking through a kaleidoscope, *sometimes whole, sometimes parts, sometimes all, sometimes none.* Blinking, Will breathed in and felt the air twist in his lungs as if the proximity of the *thing* was affecting the space around them. As if it had its own gravity, it altered all around it to its will.

Next to him, he felt Hannibal react. Watched as the man looked to his left, smile in place, and muttered one word.

"Mischa."

And the *something* seemed to quiver, and distort, and then suddenly it snapped to, becoming only *one.*

A young girl, long curled hair held up and beneath a lacy bonnet tied around her chin. She was grinning, laughing in her little blue dress, her little hands holding a basket of apples. Only…

…Will turned his head, just slightly, and the refraction split her into the L-I-E and the T-R-U-T-H…

As the *thing* changed with every turn of his head he saw…*Miriam, dead and rotting, the spectre that haunted him…*and then…*the face of his mother, cruel and* twisted…and then…the body of a young child, skinless, muscle and viscera open to the air, and upon her shoulders was worn the severed head of a stag, fur matted with blood. Will recognised it, skin going cold; it was the head of the beast that came to him in his dreams, the head of the Ravenstag. The multiple irises swivelled and spun, finally zeroing in on him. Will stiffened, the breath leaving his body all at once. He hauled in a lungful and felt it stick in his throat.

"hAn*n*iBa*l*," the *thing* said, voice warped.

And its hand lifted, reaching out for Hannibal's own. And Will saw behind it, *the t-r-u-t-h*, on the lawn it had crossed to reach them; hundreds of corpses, piled high and steaming, hundreds of people dead throughout time, all attached to this one creature that now lifted its tiny hand, stretching out as Hannibal lifted his own in return.

When Will lunged forwards and tackled them both off the cliff, it was instinct more than anything. He felt Hannibal stiffen in his hold and tightened his grip, feeling their feet leave the earth and plummet. There was a screech in the air, like time ripping itself apart, like the wind rushing, *like a young girl screaming*.

And then the water hit.

When Jack Crawford rounded the corner and his tires squealed on the asphalt, he knew he was going the appropriate speed. It helped relieve some of the immense tension in his body, because he had only stayed on the phone with Zeller long enough to get the location, not to know if Graham was alive or not. Jack had just called everyone he could possibly need, including an ambulance.

He just hoped beyond hope he didn't need a fucking hearse.

Yet when he began bombing his SUV down the last stretch of road along the forest's edge, another obstacle reared its ugly head. There were already trucks parked haphazardly across the road, and a man in a familiar Registry uniform was setting up a roadblock. Up ahead he could see Zeller arguing with someone, gesturing wildly.

“Fuck,” Jack bit out angrily; he looked to the man in the passenger’s seat who looked suitably petrified from their break-neck speed journey, “Price, with me, out the car now!”

He didn’t wait to see if Jimmy followed, merely exited the car with a deep breath and plastered on the bravado.

“Excuse me sir, this area is under…” the Registry peon tried to stop him.

Jack flashed his badge, “Don’t even try it, son,” and kept walking. He could hear Price running after him, apologising. Jack walked with purpose and no one stopped him. Jack liked to think it was down to his technique, but in truth he knew that it was more likely no one cared about his presence. The Registry operatives seemed more consumed with securing the area. Overhead a helicopter thundered, curving around wide to head back in over the forest.

“Who the hell is in charge here!” Jack boomed as he finally reached Zeller.

Brian looked harassed, “Jack! Thank Christ you’re here, I’m getting nowhere, they’ve sealed off the area and Will’s in there!”

“And that’s where he’ll stay, until everything is secured.”

Jack stopped, standing next to Brian, and felt his heart sink. The man Brian had been talking to turned out to be none other than Hopkins, head of the Registry in Baltimore. Jack ground his teeth, even as he gave Hopkins’ a curt nod of deference.

“It’s good to see you here sir,” Jack lied convincingly, “what’s the situation?”

“Jack..?” Brian looked stunned.

“Nothing for the FBI to concern themselves with,” Hopkins said stoically, blue eyes piercing, “we have this under control.”

“One of my men is in there,” Jack tried to argue, “he might be injured, we need to know he’s being extracted ASAP.”

“Will Graham is none of your concern anymore,” Hopkins said, smile not reaching his eyes, “he has got himself involved with some nasty business, very nasty indeed.”

“The fuck is he talking about?” Brian asked, panicked, “You can’t let them take Will, you fucking can’t! *Jack*!”

Crawford turned and grabbed Brain by the back of the neck, taking the man by surprise, “You keep your mouth *shut*,” and then turned to Hopkins, “anything we can do to assist you, you just need to ask.”

Hopkins nodded, looking appeased as Jack dragged Zeller off towards Price who was jogging up to them. When they were far enough away from Hopkins, Zeller shook loose of his hold, glaring daggers.

“You son of a bitch,” Brian muttered, eye wide with shock, “how the fuck could you do this? Are we just fucking pawns to you, huh?!”

Jack ignored him, pulling out his phone and beginning to dial, but suddenly Zeller leapt forwards and knocked the phone from his hands. Jack found himself grabbed by his lapels, a very irate Zeller right in his face.

“Will was right about you!” Brian ground out, his breath hot on Jack’s face, “You son of a bitch, you’re gonna sell him out to save *yourself*.”

Very calmly and slowly, Jack reached out to take Brian by the wrists and jerk his hands free. Zeller stared him in the eyes as Jack took a step back and asked Price to hand him his phone. While Jimmy tried to calm Brian down, Jack did the only thing he could think of to save them all from hell. The phone rang twice before it was answered with the usual clipped tone.

“Lounds,” she sounded bored, “what do you want Crawford?”

“To give you the scoop of a lifetime,” Jack said, not wasting words.

“Oh yeah?” she said, a sceptical laugh, “After the last lot of trash you sent me? I have better contacts than…”

“Contacts that can tell you the location of a major Registry security breach involving a possible full-blood Unnatural on US soil?”

The voice on the other end of the phone went silent, but Jack could hear the anticipation.

“You better not be shitting me Crawford, or there will be hell to pay,” Lounds sounded antsy.

“I’m the only one paying hell right now,” Jack grinned, “you got access to a helicopter that can be out to Wolftrap in ten minutes? I need you to make an entrance or the Registry is gonna cover this up faster than you can say witch hunt.”

“I can do thirteen,” Lounds said quickly, the sound of things banging and moving on the other end of the phone, “stall them as long as you can.”

Jack hung up the phone, licking his lips, trying to think. When he turned to Price and Zeller, the former looked confused, and the latter looked abashed.

“Look, I’m sorry I…” Brian started.

“I don’t have time for apologies right now,” Jack held up his hand strictly, “we need to give Lounds time to get here. Suggestions?”

“How long does she need?” Price asked.

“Thirteen minutes,” Jack said, jaw clenched.

“Thirteen minutes,” Zeller was looking into the forest, a small smile creeping onto his face, “sounds ok,” he turned as Jack frowned, “hey Crawford, at the end of your Bureau fitness test you did the yellow brick road, right?”

Jack looked at him, a sinking feeling in his chest, “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

“Good,” Brian, scanning the Registry lackeys who were too busy working to notice them, “then we go on three.”

“What the hell is happening here?” Price sounded like a disappointed parent.

“One,” Zeller and Jack began walking casually towards the forest perimeter, “two,” they sped up slightly as a Registry soldier turned and noticed them approaching the forest, “fucking *three!*”

As Crawford vaulted the barrier and began pelting down into the woods, he wished to hell he hadn’t worn brogues to work today.

For a split second, there had been cold, and wet, and *pain*. It had been over in a *split second*, and yet somehow Will felt as if that moment had gone on forever, suspended out like an event horizon.

As if he could still feel the water in his lungs, sucked down with each aborted breath…and at the same moment see his mother’s sad eyes staring down as she held him under…

When that moment changed, in that split second, suddenly things weren’t upside-down anymore, they were right way up. It just turned out that right way up wasn’t much fucking better.

He was standing in the clearing near his house, *only it was different somehow, more verdant, the plants ancient, out of time*. Behind him wood screamed and groaned, and as he turned the ancient oak at the head of the clearing swung and began to undo itself from its twisted torture.

Will’s eyes went wide as the tree, loosed from its tight grip twined into an unnatural form, began to tear itself apart. As the momentum was released, every branch sprang out, the bark stripping off, the branches severing themselves like torn flesh, exploding all at once. It was a sound like thunder, amplified by a thousand. Dropping to the ground, Will covered his head and tried to breathe, crying out from the pain in his chest as wood shattered across the arena like sparks from a fire.

And as soon as it had started, it was over. He lay there, wheezing in the cold, snow melting under his breath. It took everything he had to drag himself forwards, one heave at a time, *with every pull a stabbing, blood flowing*. When he reached Lecter, the man was unconscious.

“Hannibal,” Will reached out awkwardly, trying to shake the man awake; he was cold to the touch, his face slack, “fucking hell, don’t do this to me,” Will gritted his teeth, hauling himself up to lean on Lecter’s chest, ignoring the agony, “wake up. *Wake up!”*

Then the thundering sound reappeared, and Will readied himself for something worse, only to look up and see a helicopter swing into play over the clearing, hovering overhead. And his name, he could swear he heard his name…

“Will! *Will!*”

“Graham where the hell are you?!”

He tried his best, but blood loss and trauma conspired against him and as the voices grew louder, the thunder of the chopper grew louder, Will Graham slumped across Hannibal’s chest, unmoving.

As soon as he’d heard the cries of his men and seen Crawford and his lackey run off into the forest, Hopkins thanked his good luck. This could be the delay they’d been hoping for.

Radioing the chopper, he sniffed in the cold air and rubbed his nose, “I need pick up at perimeter site A, Hopkins out.”

It was a long wait, time seeming precious, but finally the helicopter arrived. Hopkins hurried to it, leaning down under the weight of the downward force, hopping inside and sitting down. Across from him, Chiyo sat looking out of place in tactical gear. He signed to her:

‘*Ready for this?’*

Her reply was merely a nod, even as her eyes seemed far off, as if seeing something else altogether. They flew to the incident site. The forest below them shook and twisted as they flew over, sending snow swirling into vortices. Hopkins tapped his leg impatiently, and eventually the clearing came into view. The site was a mess of wooden debris, ancient forest and littered with bodies. Though Hopkins only cared about two of them.

He leapt out as soon as they hit the ground. Crawford and the other agent were already running towards the Asset. Licking his lips, Hopkins took a sharp breath in and couldn’t believe his luck. He gestured quickly for Chiyo to follow, before hurrying to the two slumped bodies at the centre of the chaos.

Graham was barely conscious and, honestly, on the verge of death. But beneath him…

“What a fucking prize,” Hopkins was unable to stem his grin, “Chiyo! Bring the bindings!”

Hannibal fucking Lecter, prone and unconscious. Hopkins prodded the man with his shoe, elated when there was no response. He knelt down and rolled Graham off of Lecter gently, reaching out cautiously to touch his skin. Lecter was cold, and didn’t react.

Speaking into his headset, “Securing Asset H at incident site,” he gestured to Chiyo to hurry as she approached with her kit. He noticed her stall, looking beyond him. When he turned around, Hopkins found himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

“Hold it!” Crawford looked serious, as serious as the obsequious man had ever been with him which was saying something; it was difficult to be heard over the sound of the helicopter, but it was obvious without words.

“Ballsy move,” Hopkins shouted back, “I don’t take orders from you.”

“Oh yeah?” Crawford shouted, pointing up; Hopkins frowned, looking up sharply as another chopper flew into sight, the markings on the side very clearly a news channel. His lips thinned, Hopkins tried to recalculate. This wasn’t what he’d planned for. Turning back to Crawford, the man looked triumphant, “You might not take orders from me, but what about public opinion?” Crawford shouted, “Their news feed is live!”

Taking a deep breath, Hopkins looked Jack in the eye, “Terms?”

“Leave now, and we won’t make an official report.”

“Not happening,” Hopkins spat, instinctually grabbing at Graham; then a hand descended on his shoulder. Looking up sharply, Chiyo leaned in, he lips by his ear, and murmured.

“*He will come of his own free will.”*

It was a difficult moment. Every fibre of his being wanted to override everyone else and do whatever the hell he thought was best, because he did know fucking best. Hundreds of years of knowledge had been distilled down into his training, and yet…Chiyo looked stoically into his eyes. Hopkins swithered on the knife's edge, before deciding to fall down on her side.

"I want this one!" he grabbed the bindings from Chiyo's hands and began strapping them to Lecter, "You can have the rest."

Any second he expected Jack to react, only nothing was forthcoming. When he looked up, Crawford looked stony. Eventually, there was a curt nod, just one. It was enough. Hopkins ushered Chiyo in to apply the final pieces to Lecter's secure bindings, including a gag. He didn't want the creature waking up and killing them all with a word.

This can be salvaged, he thought to himself. There was still time to acquire the final Asset. This delay bought them time, if nothing else. Loading Lecter onto a stretcher, he ordered everyone back on the chopper and they rose into the air, leaving behind the chaos beneath.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zeller was shouting at him as they watched the Registry helicopter leave with Dr. Lecter imprisoned within, "Are you crazy? You let them just *kidnap* someone?"

"Don't fucking mess with me right now!" Jack shouted back, thoughts of what Hopkins had told him about Lecter spinning through his head, "That's Dr. Bloom over there! Go and check on her!"

Brian hesitated only long enough to say, "When Will wakes up he's going to fucking kill you," before running off to check on the unconscious woman Jack hadn't expected to be here.

"That's if he wakes up at all," Jack muttered to himself as he kneeled down to check on Will. His pulse was weak and his face pale, his clothes soaked in blood. Jack motioned to the news helicopter, gesturing for it to descend. Luckily for him, Freddie Lounds was insane enough to get them to do it. *Anything for a story*. They finally touched down, Lounds' instantly recognisable with her shock of red curls, looking like the cat that got the canary.

Jack ran up, wasting no time, "I need you to do me a favour."

"Really?" Lounds shouted over the noise, "And here I thought you'd called in all of those."

"You owe me big time for this story! I need you to get him to the nearest hospital!" he motioned to Will, lying prone.

She waited a few beats, before nodding. Jack helped them get Will inside and strapped in before making to enter the chopper. Lounds shook her head, "too much weight! We can't take another person, we'll take him to the hospital and radio you when we get there."

"No way Lounds, let me..!"

"Trust me Jack!" Lounds managed to somehow look sincere, "He's worth more to me alive and talking. I'll get him there safe!"

It took a lot, but Jack finally nodded, stepping back as he watched the chopper rise into the sky, bearing away his sin.

Wolf Lichen

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to you all for the support for this story, sorry for the delay in this chapter. I hope this makes up for the wait...

Once upon a time, there was an awakening. It came before the oceans formed and life sprang forth as creatures so small they could not be seen, it came before the earth formed in a fiery mass through collision and pressure, before the sun was birthed from its stellar womb, before light existed, before the explosion that populated the void.

Before time began ticking.

One upon a time, there was an awakening. A consciousness that found its home in the void, that witnessed the ultimate creation with flawless apathy. Watched as galaxies formed, as life began its journey through the vagaries of evolution, as civilizations rose and fell on planets old and new. As nothing became everything it roamed the cosmos feeding upon what now was, ravenous after experiencing so much of what wasn't. New was beautiful, and there was a banquet of it.

Knowledge and observation were its keen favourites, as well as the rampant belief and faith of the creatures it encountered. Worship and life and ruin and destruction and birth and death; it experienced (fed) and became more (grew). The consciousness glutted itself on the lives of others and grew and grew until eventually it split – RIP*! Writhing apart like a twin cut loose from its womb-mate.*

Once upon a time, there was one. Now there were two. They stared at each other, amazed to finally gaze at its own likeness, and yet un-likeness. Twins in appearance alone. On that day they parted ways, never to meet again. Slowly they disseminated their spawn across the universe, RIPPING apart space and time as they did so, becoming less and less each time, shedding mass and sentience as they did. Each spawn settled upon a planet that took its interest, becoming indentured to the soil and the sky, no longer craving the freedom of the inky wastes between worlds.

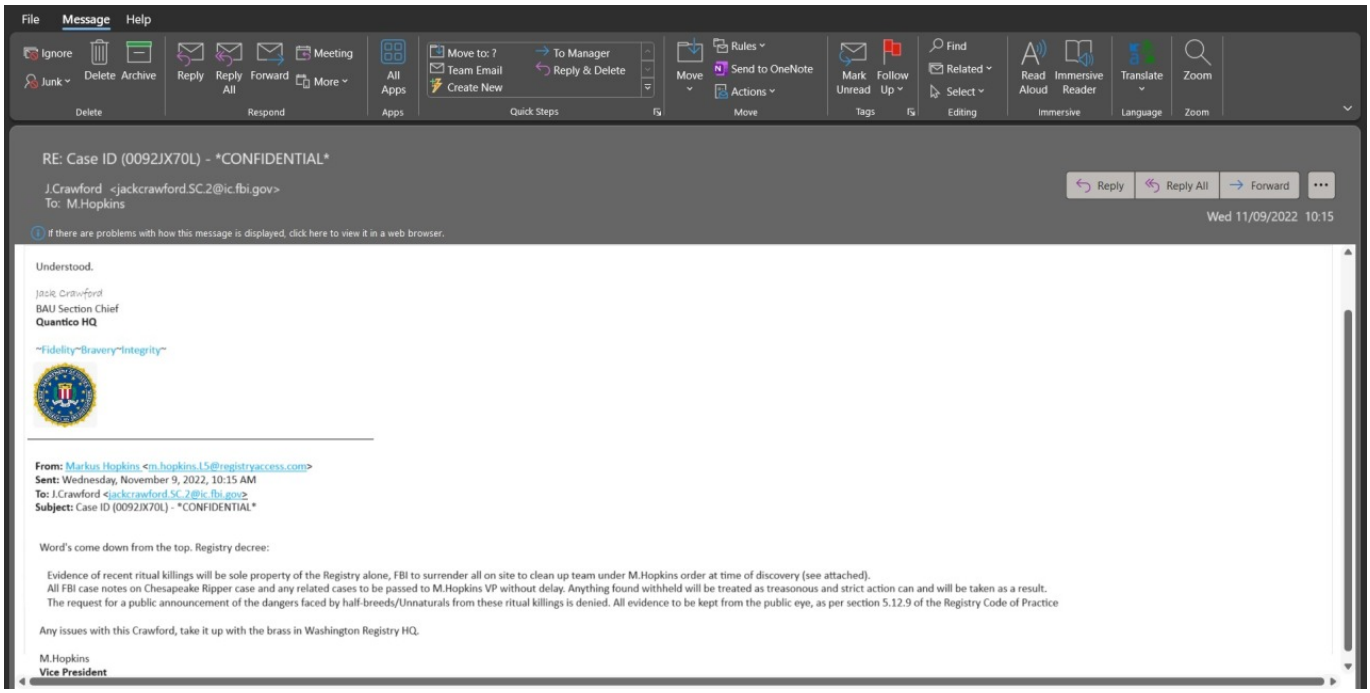
Once upon a time, a wretched child of the void sank down onto a tiny blue dot in a far-flung arm of a far-flung galaxy. It touched the soil and saw the blue sky above and knew that it was now exactly where it was supposed to be. It watched the sway of the immense forests, the sparkle of the bright water, and was entranced. Rooting itself into the planet it became that which it watched, and grew branches up towards the sunshine. Soon, creatures came from far and wide to worship at the sight of its grandeur, build around its roots and drink from the font of knowledge, losing their sanity as they gazed upon the T-R-U-T-H.

Once upon a time, there was an awakening.

Good Evening Avid Tattlers,

This reporter has a crime of the highest order to submit for your delectation today: Perjury! On Wednesday 9th the all mighty BAU put out a statement that these sinister killings in our fair city of Baltimore were not connected and being investigated as individual murders. I call perjury!

I submit to you the email evidence this reporter gathered through reliable sources to prove that the head honchos at the FBI conspired with the Registry to hide this from all you lawful citizens, to keep the truth from the half-breeds, to allow further innocents to die rather than care about you or your loved ones.


File
Message
Help
Ignore
Junk
Delete
Archive
Reply
Reply All
Forward
Meeting
More
All Apps
Move to: ?
Team Email
Create New
To Manager
Reply & Delete
Move
Rules
Send to OneNote
Actions
Mark Unread
Follow Up
Find
Related
Select
Read Aloud
Immersive Reader
Translate
Zoom
RE: Case ID (0092JX70L) - *CONFIDENTIAL*
J.Crawford <jackcrawford.SC.2@ic.fbi.gov>
To: M.Hopkins
Reply
Reply All
Forward
Wed 11/09/2022 10:15
If there are problems with how this message is displayed, click here to view it in a web browser.
Understood.
Jack Crawford
BAU Section Chief
Quantico HQ
~Fidelity~Bravery~Integrity~
From: Markus Hopkins <m.hopkins.L5@registryaccess.com>
Sent: Wednesday, November 9, 2022, 10:15 AM
To: J.Crawford <jackcrawford.SC.2@ic.fbi.gov>
Subject: Case ID (0092JX70L) - *CONFIDENTIAL*
Word's come down from the top. Registry decree:
Evidence of recent ritual killings will be sole property of the Registry alone, FBI to surrender all on site to clean up team under M.Hopkins order at time of discovery (see attached).
All FBI case notes on Chesapeake Ripper case and any related cases to be passed to M.Hopkins VP without delay. Anything found withheld will be treated as treasonous and strict action can and will be taken as a result.
The request for a public announcement of the dangers faced by half-breeds/Unnaturals from these ritual killings is denied. All evidence to be kept from the public eye, as per section 5.12.9 of the Registry Code of Practice
Any issues with this Crawford, take it up with the brass in Washington Registry HQ.
M.Hopkins
Vice President

The question remains, how long have the Registry and the FBI been in bed together? How many murders and arrests of unregistered Unnaturals have taken place with help from your own government officials? Is democracy dead for those that do not have the perfect human image that the Registry demands? This reporter asks the hard questions, and hopes you will too. These are uncertain times.

Keep your eyes open and your children close, Tattlers.

Sometimes, she would admit it was difficult to be callous; *it rubbed against the grain.* Humans were naturally empathetic creatures, without it there would be no billions across the globe. Sometimes she took it as an accolade that she was capable of such spite; *it was a gift.* She could tell herself that and not feel too disgusted. Callousness without purpose was cruel. Callousness with purpose was journalism. That was what Freddie repeated to herself as she stood in the room they had finally been ushered into by hectic hospital staff and left alone with only the sound of beeping machinery as a backdrop.

It seemed that the riots had been getting worse, and in return the Registry had been fighting back more brutally than usual if the overrun E.R. was anything to go by. Masses of people crying and wailing and holding bloodied gauze to their wounds, *more than most showing sign of fangs or fur*

or the occasional tail. Unnaturals more than most bottled up the emergency room like a wartime refugee camp.

Thoughts of the article she had published earlier that day swam into view.

Sometimes, she would admit it was difficult to be callous.

Still…the chaos had given her an opening she hadn't expected to receive. The hospital staff had no time to follow strict procedure, and her telling the nurses in a throw away line 'Yes, I'm his sister,' had gotten her free pass to stay with Graham throughout his treatment. Now, standing over the bed of the unconscious man in a quiet room with no oversight, Freddie pulled out her phone and sniffed as she reached out for his hospital gown.

"We all gotta eat," she mumbled as she pulled up the rough material and snapped a shot of the quickly bandaged wound across his abdomen.

Blood and guts sold, it was just as much human nature as empathy was. The phone continued its manufactured photo-shutter sound as she hurried, looking over her shoulder every third picture she snapped at the door that was yet to open and disturb them. She couldn't tell why but she felt watched.

A rustle. Freddie jumped, turning back to Graham with a startled expression. All she found was closed eyes and a placid face finally losing its sheen of bruises. Taking a deep breath she tried to laugh it off, only…something drew her in. To this day she could not explain rationally why she did what she did, but the feeling grew, *watched,* and grew as she reached out slowly, *watched*, and held her breath as she felt her heartbeat, *watched*, and finally balked as her fingers touched Graham's limp right eyelid and prised it open.

The black surface roamed with multiple irises that jangled around like Christmas lights in a hurricane.

Blood froze in her veins.

Breath choked in her throat.

Suddenly every last roaming eye suddenly but efficiently zeroed in on her.

The camera clicked as her frozen hand spasmed; the sound was like a knife in the neck. Stuttering back a few stumbling steps Freddie hauled in a lungful of air and coughed roughly, inhaling loudly over and over. It was suddenly a very loud noise in a very quiet room. Graham just…lay there.

Very still and very quiet. Freddie felt the hairs go up on the back of her neck.

Steadying herself against the wall was all she could do, eyes wide as dinner plates. Every time she blinked…it was there in the dark like an after-image.

"Jesus," she whispered out, panting as she hurried for the door, "jesus fucking christ."

Suddenly, the door opened as two nurses bustled in, looking at her with annoyance. Freddie pushed past them, ignoring their surly comments. As she hurried out down the busy hospital corridors, looking for the signs to find her way out, she glanced at her phone still showing the last photo it had taken. Licking her lips, she pushed them into a thin line and quickened her step.

As she walked through the waiting room, filled with the injured and the dying, *Registry guards in their imposing uniforms standing at the doors,* the television murmured just loud enough to hear.

'…a peaceful demonstration turned riot and looting spree in Highlandtown tonight, many shop owners are now saying they are arming themselves against intruders and are willing to defend their homes and businesses at any cost. A large percentage of those we spoke to tonight are blaming the Unnatural elements in their community for this outbreak of violence and vandalism. Others point the finger at the tightening stranglehold of the Registry on the countries' minorities who are trying to protest in peace, those the Registry claims are of tainted descent. Since the whistleblowing leak at the FBI proving collaboration with the Registry, many Unnaturals state that they no longer feel safe on U.S. soil…'

As she passed by the guards she felt unnecessarily worried, as if at any second she might be singled out, that they would somehow be able to smell whatever Graham had smeared onto her brain. For a brief, very brief moment, Freddie thought she might have empathy with the *bloodied* and the *weeping.* Once through the automatic doors, she felt like she could breathe again.

"We all gotta eat," she muttered as she sped out into the crisp winter air, leaving that feeling behind her as the doors whined shut.

Wheels running over wood, *the steady thump-thump-thump of floorboards*, then a stop and swivel and the leap in his stomach only an elevator could cause, *going down and down and down*, and then wheels across rubberized floor smooth and even, *he could smell it in the heat, the oppressive heat*, they were on a slow but steady downwards slope, *the further they walked the more muted the wheels became and the click-clack of footsteps and, eventually, sound altogether.*

Even behind the blindfold, Hannibal Lecter knew with certainty where he was, or more importantly what was before him.

The Door. He had seen it once, many years ago, even before the Hopkins family got their grubby mitts on it. *1736, master sculptor Shubin and his understudies would sit, enthralled, and* ***listen*** *to him speak, their hands working the divine into the mundane.* Knowing that the door was close through feeling alone, Hannibal was glad to know it had lost none of its potency. He had helped build it, after all.

Not a humming exactly, but the feeling of vibration as if it were in every cell in his being; as if the air itself were unable to keep still. It permeated flesh and bone and *soul.* It felt…horrifying. If he were able to shout, he was sure he would have, screamed even. But as it was he was nothing but a mute as he was rolled onwards, feeling the heat increase and increase and *increase* until it and the humming were suddenly and inexplicably gone.

Disorientated and nauseous, Hannibal lost track of the turns and the sounds of doors and the smells as they continued. Eventually he became aware that they might have moved from navigating corridors to settle in a larger room, *it felt airier in here and sounds were echoing.* The gurney he was on stopped with a jolt and then pulled back and to the right, like he was being maneuvered into place.

Then, nothing. As his stomach rolled up and over itself, Lecter tried his best to listen for the sounds of anything that could at all be indicative of what was happening and who was nearby. As he strained, unused to having his senses hampered so, he caught something repetitive approaching. It

stood out above the rest of the amorphous noise, *click-click-click-click*; high heels on stone. They stopped directly next to him and Hannibal adjusted his mouth around the heavy gag, tongue pushed back so far that it made him choke as he swallowed.

"We're ready for you Dr. Lecter," a familiar voice said.

Searching in the darkness. *No memory of the impact*. Moving sluggish through the water. *No feel of cloth or skin or anything near.*

Alone.

Lost.

Without thinking twice, Will Graham opened his mouth and tried to shout. The pitch black fluid rushed into his lungs like it was a race. He struggled, choking, clawing at his chest, panic causing the water to inhale deeper, deeper, *deeper*...

Flailing upright against the feel of hands trying to hold him down, Will felt his abdomen spasm and his lungs convulse and suddenly he was vomiting water like it was a bad shellfish lunch. *Flashes in his blurry vision of a room and maybe hands and long hair hanging down into his eyes.* Desperate to take a breath he tried and *choked* and vomited again, listening to the sharp sound of it hitting the floor and splattering.

The mind he connected with was familiar and yet unfamiliar, she was worried but she was angry, she was hopeful but not wanting to get her hopes up, she was…

"Oh my god, jesus," a familiar voice said, shocked, "fuck, I'll get the doctor."

Gripping the raised rail that was keeping him from falling out of the bed, Will looked up and blinked, coughing roughly, to find Alana bloom in a hospital gown and long bathrobe pushing the button to call the nurse over and over again. There were voices in the background, faint but constant. As his wavering eyes wandered over the room he caught sight of the television, two news anchors going through the motions.

"A-al..Alana," he managed, sucking in a pained, difficult breath only to fall into a coughing fit; she hurried to him, reaching out to rub calming circles across his back. He wished she wouldn't, but didn't have the wherewithal to do anything about it. As Will stared down at the floor he was amazed that the water he had brought up was real.

Does…does that mean everything else wasn't just a dream? He thought bleakly.

"It's ok, you're ok," Alana soothed, though she sounded fraught, "I think, anyway. Shit, where the fuck is the nurse!" she said as she started hammering the button.

"Don't," Will managed to say, slowly releasing his death grip on the rail and lowering himself back into the bed, "I-I'm ok. Please."

Alana shot him a look but didn't give up trying. As he lay on the uncomfortable bed, shaking, one sudden and loud question blared into his vision. She seemed upset but at least still able to be

pragmatic. In opposition, Will felt his mind was in turmoil, rolling around like a washing machine in a tornado. Even as he tried to read Alana, her thoughts were jumbled and stuttering.

"What the…fuck are y-you doing here?" he decided asking aloud was the only way out of this mess.

"It's a bit of a long story," Alana murmured, keeping her eyes from his.

"Do I look," a rough cough, "like I'm in a h-hurry?"

She didn't seem to be able to resist a smile, even if it was strained, "I guess not, huh."

Sighing, Alana gave up pressing the buzzer with a sour look. Navigating the pool of water on the ground she grabbed a free chair and dragged it over to Will's bedside, sitting down with a rush of air like she were deflating. Her left hand rubbed over her whole face roughly, as if to soothe an ache.

Will lay as still as he could, hand automatically rushing to the feel of bandages across his abdomen; *underneath, he could feel the stitch and glue of surgeons sewing him back together*. The memories of how he got here were like a haunting, ghosts roaming his mind with grasping fingers.

Underground. The Great Stag. Lost. The mansion. Lecter.

That…thing.

"Where should I start?" Alana asked, breaking his unpleasant reverie.

"What?" Will frowned, blinking over and over; he rubbed at his right eye. It itched.

"Sorry," she cleared her throat and curled her arms around her middle, "I mean what do you remember last?"

"I…" it was an exercise in pain, forcing the recollection. His mind *hurt*, felt raw and tender; closing his eyes he tried, face scrunching, forehead furrowed, "I…was in a box. Underground. I was trapped."

Suddenly opening his eyes was terrifyingly important; *to make sure that this was real, and he wasn't still in that gruesome box six feet under*. Taking short breaths, Will glanced at Alana. She was solemn but sad and she looked like she wanted to reach out and hug him. He was glad she resisted the urge. His head ached like it wanted to split in two, he didn't think he'd survive skin-to-skin contact.

"Yeah," she nodded, taking a long breath and letting it out slow, "we figured out as much, but it took us a while longer than we would have liked."

"Then he told you?" Will looked at her, alert, "He got my m-message?"

Frowning, Alana shrugged, "Brian didn't say anything about a message," she said, "but he found you."

"No," Will said without thinking; Alana stared at him, frowning, "I mean, I…Lecter. I thought Hannibal, he…"

It didn't take a mind reader to know that the shift in Alana's posture and visage when Hannibal's name was mentioned meant nothing good. Will cleared his throat over and over, fingers of his right hand scrunching in and out of the duvet. The news switched in the corner of his eye, a reporter standing out in the rain, behind him rows of windows smashed out, burnt.

"Hey, is he ok?" he asked, "Alana? Hannibal, is he alright?"

Because I need to have some fucking words with him that he isn't going to like, Will thought darkly.

When she didn't answer, Will frowned.

"Fuckin'…" another cough, "spit it out! What the hell is going on?"

"I wasn't there for this, so my info is second hand but…" she eventually found his eyes and held them, transmitting a jumbled mess of anxiety and guilt that Will found it hard to bear, "as far as I understand it he's been taken in by the Registry for questioning."

There was an audible pause, "*What* did you say?" Will muttered, shocked.

"There was…look-" Alana stalled, "you should talk to Jack. He was there, I don't know the details."

"Taken? Are you sure?" Will struggled to sit up; Alana moved forward to stop him, "*don't* touch me," he said harshly, feeling instant regret when her face fell, "please Alana, I can't handle it right now."

She sat down, nodding softly. For a moment there was silence, punctuated only by Will's coughs. *Shit*, was all he could think, *this is fucking insane.* Flicking his eyes away just for something to do, he saw the screen had changed to an interview with the Baltimore Chief of Police, his face stern.

After a while, Alana spoke, "You haven't asked me."

"Asked you?"

"Yeah, you haven't asked me why," she pursed her lips wryly while Will stared, "haven't asked me the question people always ask when someone is taken in by the Registry. *Why*."

Swallowing was rough and sore. Will rubbed at his face and avoided her stare.

"Why do they take anyone in these days?" he shrugged, wincing, "Fucking fascists don't need a reason…"

"How long have you known," Alana butted in quickly as if the words had come out against her better judgement, sounding hurt, "that he isn't human?"

"He's as human as you or me," Will defended hastily, though the flip-flop in his gut disagreed; *you don't know what he is, do you*, "or are you so quick to judge anyone the Registry sets its sights on."

"That's so unfair!"

"Things generally are. That's why you have to think for yourself, not blindly believe whatever you see in front of you."

Silence. Will tried once more and, this time, managed to sit up. Looking at Alana, he couldn't help but feel guilty. She was staring at the window on the back wall, head turned away, lips pressed together, arms folded and legs crossed. He wished he had time to talk it through, but as it was he felt he'd lost time rather than gained it and everything was coming to a big fucking messy end. Just as he opened his mouth, the door to his room swung open and a bustling trio of Jack, Brian and Jimmy pushed their way in. Will winced at the loudness, both physical and mental. The news became muted by the sudden cacophony.

"Holy shit, you're awake!" Brian exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear as he hurried over to Will's bed.

"Well, this will make things easier," Jimmy said, looking to Jack.

Jack said nothing. Will said nothing. They simply stared. Brian enthusing about Will's not being dead, Jimmy helping Alana stand up as he tried to bring them all up to date with their findings…it all drifted into the background.

Will Graham stared at Jack Crawford, and found no resistance.

Knowing that the betrayal was an inevitability of sorts, that breaking of trust which had never fully healed in the first place. Like a broken bone incorrectly set; fragile. Knowing that as soon as he saw him, Will would know. Know everything. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Slowly, it became more and more obvious, as conversation died down and the occupants of the room looked awkwardly back and forth between the two silent men. Suddenly, the news was loud enough to hear.

"*…an update on the breaking headline, F.B.I. leaked email has now been traced back to a whistleblower who we currently cannot name. For those of you just joining us, this is the scandal that broke earlier today which was highlighted to the press by an email showing communication and collaboration between Quantico F.B.I. department head Jack Crawford and the Vice President of the Registry Marcus Hopkins in relation to the serial killings taking place in Baltimore at this time. The email holds damning evidence against both men in which they appear to have put the lives of the public at risk…"*

When Jack's knees wavered and he stumbled, holding himself up against the wall, for a minute no one seemed to notice; all eyes were on the t.v., all eyes were on the picture of the email, bold as brass. All eyes except Will and Jack.

Alana was the first to speak up, "*Will!*"

Their eyes skittered away from each other, Jack guilty, Will tight with anger. There was only silence as Jack sat down heavily in his chair, wiping at his nose, *skin smudged red with blood*. Will looked down at his hands, blinking rapidly.

"Well, looks like the cat is out of the bag," Brian said tightly.

"The media love a good story," Jimmy shrugged.

"I want to see Hannah," Will said quietly, "she's in the ICU."

"How did you know that?" Jimmy asked, looking abashed when Brian shot him a look.

Will glared over at Jack who avoided his gaze, “lucky guess.”

Once upon a time, there was a special girl. She was not special in appearance, or height, or the ability to run fast, or catch fish, or paint, or build. In fact, her useful abilities to the tribe were limited, apart from one specific thing on one specific day.

Their tribe had been driven from their home by warring neighbours who coveted their land for its access to the wide, abundant river for fish and water, and the edge of the vast forest for its wood and wild boar. Wandering, lost and with many slain, they had been battered and bruised and hated without a home. The elder had been carried on a makeshift cart, heavy and bleeding. In that moment, she had touched the young girl and smiled.

‘Water,’ had been her one dying wish, ‘bring me water.’

Once upon a time, the girl rushed into the forest and came across a curious spring. It bubbled up from the roots of an endlessly tall tree, located in a large clearing. Rushing back with the water in a skein, the elder drank greedily. The tribe stopped, wide eyed in awe as the elder coughed and hacked and then stood, raising her hands to the sky.

Wounds cured. Vigor restored. ***Eyes open.*** *The girl led them into the forest, and they stood in awe of the Great Tree and the font trapped within its roots.*

Once upon a time, a tribe settled in the clearing of the Great Tree as it came to be known, and it was a rite of passage to drink from the font of knowledge, allow the water to bring the core of being to life. Over time, they began to realise they were becoming powerful. Some among them could perform miracles.

Produce fire without a flint and stone.

Know the thoughts of others without any speech passing lips.

Give birth to children with unusual appearance that allowed them to hunt with great speed, or dive into the water without drowning.

To take on the attributes of the animals they consumed; fur and fang and gills and eyes that could see in the darkness.

Have knowledge of things unknown: the building of wells, irrigation, engineering to grind grain, to bake bread in great ovens, to build and to create a defended settlement of walls and traps, to create beauty and art and the ability to see the stars.

Once upon a time, a tribe of humans grew powerful beneath the shadow of a Great Tree. A civilization emerged.

And others noticed.

Brian hated wheelchairs in general, but hospital wheelchairs were by far the worst. They inevitably

always had at least one bad wheel and two bad handles. This one veered to the right, forcing him to overcorrect constantly. It was playing havoc with his back.

Will had been eerily quiet ever since Jack had…brought him up to speed so to put it. Not that he could blame the man, it was a lot to take in at once. So much had happened in the short time since he had gone missing and then ended up in surgery for internal injuries and then woken up angry in a hospital bed. Brian was sure he would have been spitting mad right now.

But instead, Will was silent as they rolled through the halls searching for ICU.

“So we have an APB out on both of them, Stammets and Buddish and this guy Budge, and pretty soon after that Bev finds some pretty interesting links between all three of them and, wait for it, *Frederick fucking Chilton* from the Baltimore Institute. Can you believe it? Guy’s a fucking crook at best, and at worst he’s a murderer. Oh, uh, excuse me, which way to the ICU from here..?”

Following the directions given by the nurse, Brian continued to talk just to fill the dead air. Whether Will was listening or not was another thing altogether. Being pushed around in a wheelchair, Will looked out of place in his clothes, still crusted with dried blood. But then Will had wanted out of the hospital gown as soon as he had been able to get shakily to his feet. Alana had tried to interject but she’d been overridden pretty quick, seemed even she wasn’t able to get through to the reasonable area of Will’s brain when he was this het up. Which had been part of the reason he’d volunteered to take Will to see his matron in ICU he supposed: damage limitation.

“Oh yeah, by the way you were right about the fires,” Brian continued as he wound his way through an open area filled with chairs, a sleepy waiting room at this time of night, “Jimmy went out with a Pyro and they found something, not sure what. The guy was really freaked though. Maybe you can look at the thing they found when you come back to Quantico.”

This time the silence was telling. Brian cleared his throat and sniffed, stopping suddenly and backing up to let an older lady and her carer shuffle past. He smiled at them on instinct, even though he didn’t really feel like smiling at all.

“And Bev’s been to the MLCV, met the coven leaders, she’s still working with them out there, not sure what about,” Brian continued as he avoided a hospital bed being pushed by an orderly, “thinks maybe they can shed some light on this whole mess, and…honestly, I think that’s it.”

Still nothing. Brian, chewed at his bottom lip as they waited for an elevator. He fucking hated hospitals. *Impossible not to think back to being in the hospital waiting for mom, to see if she was alright, holding the social worker’s hand. “Everything will be fine, Brian,” she had said with the air of someone who said the same thing to different kids dozens of times a day, “don’t you worry.”*

Now, he thought he maybe knew how the social worker felt. Trying to reassure Will that everything would be just fine, when truly everything was fucked. From above all he could see was Will’s curls, and his hands gripping the wheelchair arms so tight his knuckles were white.

"Look, I'm sorry about Lecter," he tried, knowling the words were awkward, "if it helps, I don't think Jack did the right thing but...he did it to stop them taking you. And Lecter, there's something off about that guy."

Memories of following Lecter without question, of a gun in his hand and the dead female creature bleeding to death in front of him, all black skin and claws; things Will didn't need to know right now.

“Hey,” he tried to reassure regardless, “we’ll work this out, alright? Together, ok?” Will seemed to flinch, but Brian cleared his throat and said, “I said I’d help you, didn’t I? I don’t go back on my word, bud.”

Knowing Will didn’t do physical contact couldn’t stop Brian reaching out to grip his shoulder and given him a reassuring shake as they rolled out, wheels bumping up and over.

“It’s in here,” Will mumbled, making Brian stop short.

“Huh?”

“Hannah,” he pointed at a doorway, “she’s in there.”

Zeller didn’t bother to ask how Will could possibly know. He had given up trying to understand. Lecter’s words floated around in his mind: *Will Graham is no simple backwoods witch*. As he pushed the door open and entered backwards, pulling the chair with him, he tried not to think about it too hard.

The air filled with beeping and the hiss-huff of a respirator. He had never met Will’s matron, but right now, staring at the wizened old woman in a hospital bed draped with wires, he could hardly imagine her as a powerful practitioner. She looked like someone that had been dug up out a timely grave.

“Excuse me,” a nurse who had been attending to a saline bag suspended from an I.V. stand turned around, impertinent, “you can’t be in here.”

“Actually, I can,” Will said, struggling to stand up; as the nurse pressed a silent alarm by the bed Will hobbled to the bed and sat down on the side, reaching out to take Hannah’s hand.

“Shit, Will maybe we should wait outside,” Brian insisted as he heard heavy boot tread approaching.

“Hannah,” Will was saying, ignoring them all, “are you there?”

“*They just barged in Doctor,*” he could hear the nurse saying.

“Hey, you two, you need to leave,” a man in a stereotypical white coat over black slacks and a striped shirt ordered, stern-faced; he was flanked by security who looked less than happy to be there.

In all honesty, even though Brian had given Will shit when they first met for being an unknown factor, a rebellious witch that used questionable magics, he didn’t think he’d ever seen Will quite like he was now. There was a strange presence in the room, *like he was being watched.* Rubbing at the back of his neck, Brian swallowed and tried to blink, squinting at Will.

The look in his eyes was that of a wild animal setting its sites, with a fathomless feeling floating above it all like a beacon. When Graham turned his eyes to the doctor, the white-coated man flinched.

“Actually,” Will said tightly, “I am exactly where I’m supposed to fucking be. This woman is under my care, I invoke the Rite.”

“You *what*?” the doctor asked.

“She’s my matron and under the Rite that makes me next of kin,” Will stated plainly, “which means you’ll be unhooking these pointless machines right fucking now.”

“That is a very bad choice, sir. I am her primary care physician, can we please take a minute to talk about…”

“She’s dying and you can’t help her!”

“Security,” the doctor nodded to the men flanking him; as they made to hurry forward, Brian sighed as he reached for his badge, only…

It was totally unnecessary. Will simply smiled, and it wasn’t pleasant. Brian barely caught the muttered words that fell from Will’s lips, and he definitely didn’t understand them.

'Agairt mé an rite.'

No one paid attention, until of course the security men tried to take hold of Will or remove him from Hannah’s bed. Brian stared, amazed, as the men seemed to become confused and bleary the longer they tried to interfere, unable to focus, their hands consistently missing their target, eyes blinking, disoriented. Will was watching them with a calm sort of malice.

“Sarah, call the Registry officers at the front door,” the doctor said to the nurse.

“Look buddy,” Brian stepped forward, trying his best to calm the situation down, “this is FBI business,” only the doctor seemed to be staring right past him; Brian frowned, “hey, doc..?”

A chiming. There was…chiming, far away, like a church bell from a tower on a nearby hill. The air felt still but somehow simultaneously buzzed with energy. His head ached. His legs cramped, his arms fell to his sides limp. His eyes, staring straight forwards, were able to see the rest of the room caught in the same trap, *flies in the ointment.* No one else moved, not the doctor, the nurse, the security guards.

As Brian struggled to make his frozen voice box work, he was forced to watch Will Graham stand from the bed and rush as fast as he could for the wheelchair by the door, pushing it determinedly. Piece by piece he stripped Hannah Robicheaux of the wires and the cannulas and the monitors, turning them off to stop their awful alarms.

Brian’s eyes shook with effort as he watched Will pulled her into the wheelchair and covered her in a blanket from the bed, then begin roughly pulling the doctor’s coat from the man’s body and shrugged into it; their eyes finally met.

“Tá brón orm, a chara,” Will said quietly, jerking into the white coat and grabbing the handles of the wheelchair, “Is peaca an feall ach is beannacht é maithiúnas.”

And then he was gone. *Just gone.*

Staring at the door, Brian felt a pain in his chest and tried to ignore it. Irrational, he knew it was, but…

He’d been thirteen, when his father had left them, *him and his mother*. Some nights, when he was pretty low, his brain would bring the memory of that night to the fore. His mom, crying on the couch. The broken glass on the carpet. It would have been easier, he had always thought, if his

father had never cared. Only he had, and his father told him so every night how much he loved him. His father had been his best friend. His father had understood him. Which, in the end, only made the betrayal all the harder to bear.

Chanting on the air like crickets chirping, *whispering and constant.* If he tried, he thought he could make out the words though it did him little good. Even though he could translate and recognize the verses, it told him nothing of how far through the ritual they were.

What was more useful to understand was that they were ready to incorporate him.

'We're ready for your Dr. Lecter.'

The darkness was lifted suddenly and without ceremony, and there was a face he remembered. *One in a line of many, she had been a particular memory he cherished. His 'aunt' by design alone not by blood relation, Lady Murasaki had been a creature of beauty and grace, as well as unfaltering pragmatism. He had loved her once, as she had loved him. It had been a low point in his life when he had been forced to leave her, but her husband the Count had not taken news of his cuckold well.* Now, he was surely seeing her face on another.

A woman, young but with eyes that had seen more than her years, black hair in a strict bob, face like a beautiful porcelain doll and with just as little expression. She wore the traditional robes of a priestess, woven of fine silk brocaded with silver thread and adorned with gems and things of importance; *the skull of a raven, the antlers of a young buck upon the arms, the wings of an eagle across the shoulders.*

Hannibal watched dispassionately as she looked down at him, her eyes narrowing momentarily before she lifted a hand and waved curtly to the three men Hannibal could just see out the corner of his vision. Suddenly, the gurney moved, wheels rattling, and he was pushed out into the arena.

Finally, he thought. The room took shape. Big was too small a word, *vast would be better*. It had the length of a football field, and the domed ceiling of a planetarium. The ground, or what he could see of it as they rolled across, was marked with paint outlining huge arrays, vast circles adorned with glyphs and runes and symbols of all kinds, thousands and thousands of markings, some large some miniscule, some in white or yellow or blue; *some in red*. Some were still being worked on by busy technicians wearing straw warding dolls around their necks. Some were being looked at by more senior techs who were erasing and rewriting with strained faces and furrowed brows.

Every now and then they would roll past something that wasn't painted into the floor. Every now and then they would pass something that cast a shadow, mainly indiscernible in form until they drew closer: *first a lone torso, no legs or arms or head, placed specifically at the axis of three joining circles, its skin painted with a myriad of symbols in ink tattooed onto dead flesh.* Another they passed: *a head resting upon a severed hand, cheek pressed into palm as if in sleep; its eyes had been replaced by intricate golden orbs detailed with what looked like ancient Hebrew*.

The room was mainly dead air, and yet it hummed with movement and energy and a not indiscernible amount of fear. There was the sound of a busy warehouse, movement of feet and machinery and artefacts, but not much talking. He stared upwards at the ceiling, a dome of rock inlaid with astronomical charts. A carven monument to those who wished to control that which could not be controlled. Eventually, the wheels of the gurney stopped moving. Hannibal looked around. There was a small group of people nearby, inspecting many chains attached to the floor.

One of the men looked up, catching his eye, and looked shocked, then seemed to realise exactly what was happening and ran elatedly towards them.

“Are you serious..?” his voice became audible over the hum and bustle of the room at large; he hurried to a stop a few feet away, clasping his hands. He looked as if he were in his mid forties, skin the colour of charcoal, hair shaved until his scalp shone, eyes a startling blue beneath no obvious eyebrows. Despite his age the man let out a giggle that he covered with a hand, “I don’t believe it. When did this happen, why wasn’t I *informed*? Hannibal Lecter, *the* Lecter. It is an honour,” reaching out to touch him, fingers twitching.

A pale hand shot out from under the woman’s bulky robe to grab the man’s offending hand. The priestess stared at the man with eyes that could have cut steel.

“No direct contact, Adebayo,” she said, he voice steady as the tides, “you know the rules.”

“Oh, you are no fun Chiyo,” Adebayo said, pulling away from her and rubbing at his wrist; there was a long pause, before Adebayo turned and began giving orders to his team. They hurried forwards, donning thick gloves, and Hannibal found himself quickly and efficiently transferred from gurney to ground. It was so efficient, in fact, that Hannibal was sure this man Adebayo and his team must have been practicing this procedure for many years.

He gave no fight, there was no point. Strength was to be saved for later.

Adebayo gave strict orders at specific moments, like a coxswain guiding his rowers. With every word a lab tech would manipulate Lecter’s body in a specific manor, slowly but surely stripping him of his clothes; *first trousers, then waistcoat, then shirt, then socks, then underwear.* Once fully nude he was brought to the chains and fastened meticulously into them – one each for his ankles and wrists, and a fifth for his neck. *Snicked shut*.

They pulled slightly at his skin as he was raised to his knees and his arms pulled back and down. Hannibal took the moment to test his bonds; *secure*. He felt his lip twitch in frustration, but then gave up on the feeling. Even if he could free himself, there would be no way to remove his gag, and without his **voice** escape would be difficult, if not fatal. It would be important to let this play continue, until the final act.

There was always time to salvage even the most bleak of situations. *There was always a hand worth playing.*

“Ling Chao, we will need the branding iron,” Adebayo was saying to one of his techs, a stern faced woman in her forties, “please ask Bosch if his team is finished with it and then bring it here and link it up to the generator. We will need to monitor the temperature, the generators have been getting flunky recently.”

Rolling his shoulders with difficulty, Hannibal looked up slowly to catch the eyes of the woman he now knew as Chiyo. And her eyes started right back.

Thump-*whine*-thump-*whine.* A low-beat backdrop to their stilted car journey, fogging up the windscreen with anxiety.

“That was back when they didn’t have to care 'bout people’s rights or privilege. Just *BAM BAM BAM!* Your neighbour’s door was broken down and all you could do was sit there listening through the wall, shitting yourself that you were next. Seems like that now, right? Like it’s creeping back in. All for the greater good, right?”

The raids of eighty four. Stammets like to exposit about his history with the last big disaster the Unnatural community had experienced before the prejudice and everyday discrimination and bigotry had become the norm. A social milestone, when the Registry had made good on its threats to oust and demolish the Unnaturals in their communities who were making waves, creating unrest.

Or, when you looked at it more rationally, when Unnaturals were just asking for the right to be alive without fear, hatred, mistrust and having every moment of their lives watched and monitored like they would become the devil himself at the drop of a hat.

Tobias had been just one year old when the raids erupted across the U.S, sparking a chain reaction of unrest and violence, looting and crime, murder and mayhem. Man hitting beast, beast hitting back. Most of the time he would roll his eyes at Stammet’s somewhat paranoid ranting. Now, as he looked out the car window while they drove down the main thoroughfare, at the burnt out cars, at the smashed windows and blackened buildings, at the rust coloured pools on the street…it seemed all too real, no longer just a blurry memory kept alive by the generation that suffered through it.

“Would you just keep your eyes on the road?” Budge said tightly; despite his sentiment, he needed Stammets to focus. The last thing he wanted was to be caught out now.

“I am!” Eldon ground out, fingers white knuckled on the wheel; as they rounded the corner there were two police cars parked, officers holding three people at gunpoint, “Shit!”

“Just drive normally, for god’s sakes!” Tobias muttered, eyes forward.

Once they were far enough away to breathe, he let out the air in his lungs he didn’t realise he’d been holding, sucking in a breath quick and sharp. Looking to Eldon he caught the man grinning, eyes watering, and couldn’t help but bark out a laugh. They laughed hard, eyes crying as they drove away. He could feel his heart beating in his chest.

“You fucking prick,” he said between hiccoughs of laughter, “one of these days you’re going to get us…”

Then the loud noise of the siren, *bwip-bwip,* and the flash of the lights, *red and blue*. Time seemed to slow down, for that moment, as Tobias felt his heart stop, saw the look on Stammet’s face fall, change to that of a frightened deer-in-the-headlights; then, suddenly, to that of the wolf backed into the corner.

“Wait *no*..!” was all he could shout before Stammets slammed his foot down on the accelerator, sending the back wheels out in an oversteer, flailing as he tried to wrench Eldon’s hands from the wheel, and then suddenly back again and lurching forwards as they fled.

The car was screaming as Stammets pushed and pushed until the speedometer jiggled, taking corners with a hideous screeching, and still the red and blue pursued. Closing his eyes was all he could do. *Was this really how it would end, after everything they had been through, after all the atrocities he had performed, to meet a paltry end at the barrel of some flatfoot’s gun, or being carted off to the Registry to be taken downstairs to the labs?*

“I’m sorry Frederick,” he found himself muttering like a man who had already given up, eyes squeezed shut, “I’m sorry, my love.”

When the car squealed to a halt his eyes sprang open on instinct. He was only given a moment to look over at Stammets, wild eyed and red faced, before the man leaned over and flung open the passenger door and shoved him roughly out. Tobias fell, looking back in shock.

“*Run you stupid fuck!”* Stammets shouted before peeling out.

Without thinking Tobias did as he was told, allowing his animal instinct to take over. As he ran through the alley he could hear the cop car catching up, flying after Stammets in a flurry of dust and sirens.

Altruism had been the last thing he’d thought any of his companions capable of. It seemed the dream, *the hope of returning their humanity being so close,* had compelled even the hardest hearted of them to sacrifice.

Chest aching and lungs burning, Tobias Budge hid in between two dumpsters and slid down the wall, breathing ragged and legs shaky. The plan was well and truly fucked, and now he was alone. Shaking his head, he grit his teeth and continued to pant. He needed to regroup. He needed help.

Reaching into his shirt, he brought out the necklace his matron had given to him on the day he had joined the Maryland Coven, *a silver feather within a circle of protection*.

‘Birds of a feather flock together,’ she would always say to him, her smile kindly.

Maybe it was time to finally go home, he thought as he stood, dusting down his clothes.

Once upon a time, there was a king. This king was lord of many tribes and his lands were vast. He ruled through fear and intimidation, through violence and cunning. Many feared him, and many more loathed him, and even more were envious of his position. But none, as yet, had challenged him and won.

Yet now, there came news to his ears of a people growing to the south. Tales of a woodsy tribe that had been banished many years ago from their home, that now had a grand settlement in the forest. It was mainly hearsay and conjecture, but the king grew interested in the stories of the grand fortress and the strange beast-men that kept it.

Once upon a time, a king and his army of conscripts marched to find a fairy tale, and through fear *and* intimidation *and* bribery*, they were led to the clearing and the site of the Great Tree. The people within were not keen to give him an audience, and they gates of their impressive walls stayed closed. However, the king was not used to being told no.*

They laid siege to the fort, but over time his men grew weak and weary, hungry and bored. The king grew impatient, and so relied on his cunning. Over many days, he started to talk to the warriors of the fort that patrolled the walls. Many rejected his words, but finally one began to talk. And talk they did, and slowly but surely the cunning king put ideas into the young man’s head, of riches and power, of harems of women, of fine clothes and status.

Finally, on the fortieth day, the young man he had befriended opened the gates while the sun was just beginning to peak over the horizon, and the king's army slipped inside unnoticed by the sleeping soldiers as they changed the guard. The battle that ensued was brutal and bloody and merciless. A slaughter.

Once upon a time, a cunning king usurped a haven of knowledge and science, of art and culture. And he claimed it as his own, enslaving the men and women and creatures he found as its inhabitants. He was led to the font of knowledge but merely laughed, refusing to drink. Instead, he bade his men make the slaves drink, and soon he created a civilization that was rivalled by no other, led by an army of slaves with the abilities of the gods.

And for the first time the first children of the Great Tree knew only shackles and chains.

Once upon a time, there was an awakening.

A faint smell of fake pine still lingered in the air, even after he had snapped the magic tree from the rear-view mirror and dumped it out the window. Sitting at a red light in the stolen van from the hospital parking lot, Will Graham drummed on the steering wheel with one had while he bit at the thumb of the other. *Nervous*, he thought to himself inanely, *of course you are, you fucking idiot, look what you're doing*!

Flicking his eyes over to Hannah, strapped into the passenger seat, eyes still closed and head still lolling in unconsciousness, Will took a deep breath and hoped to all hell that his instincts were steering him right. He flinched, cursing as his abdomen complained at the action. Rubbing at his wound, Will muttered a few words.

"Lig don phian tú a thógáil."

When the pain slowly faded to nothing, Will wouldn't lie; he was amazed. Normally a spell such as that would only take the edge off, but now? His abilities were becoming stronger with each passing minute. The thought only heightened his nerves. *Memories of the great stag, of its steaming skull, its rolling eye, the huge tree twisted into a painful shape.*

"What the fuck is happening," he whispered over and over, jiggling his leg involuntarily.

He really hoped he was doing the right thing, or he would probably be going to jail for life for manslaughter. Or worse, he'd be gifted to the Registry. A shiver of cold slinked down his spine. Swallowing, he looked up to the traffic light, frowning. Leaning forwards, Will stared.

Sitting atop the traffic light was a large, black crow. A familiar bird. The light turned green and he pulled out, obeying every traffic law to the letter. The last thing he wanted was to be pulled over. As he drove, the crow flew above in the sky. Soon, it was joined by another smaller bird, its white and blue-black feathers shining; *a magpie*.

"No such thing as coincidences," Will murmured to himself; when he came to the next junction he indicated right, but the two birds flew left. Hesitating only a moment, Will changed his signal and veered left to follow them. Looking behind in his mirror, he saw a cop car pull out on the next street down, right where he would have been. Swallowing, Will took a deep breath and decided to follow his good omen, *his birds of good fortune.* They led him steadily onwards, until city gave

way to suburbs, the suburbs gave way to the countryside, the countryside gave way to the woods and the forest. The wind picked up and the rain became heavier. A storm setting in.

Eventually, just as it was getting dark, Will pulled onto a dirt road. His wipers were going heavy, *whine-thump-whine-thump*, and his tires bouncing. The lights from the headlamps showed the uneven road ahead, lined by weeds, tall grass and ferns. Will followed it, eventually turning left and opening out into a wider road. It was only a short minute or so until he arrived at the one place he thought he'd never turn to.

The sign was hard to make out in the gloom as he waited by the large wooden gate, but honestly he thought he could sense its meaning regardless.

"*Ní féidir ach le cairde dul isteach*," Will read out loud, snorting, "well, I might be fucked then."

Even as the words left his mouth, the gate made a screeching sound, then a judder, and slowly began to open. Watching closely, Will licked at his lips, eyes flitting around for any sign of danger. When none came, he took one last look at Hannah and sighed.

"I hope you know what I'm going through for you," he said in irritation, even as he reached out to grip her arm with a hope he did not feel ready to analyse, "old bag."

Foot down, the stolen van rolled into the compound and the gate closed behind it.

"Tá brón orm, a chara. Is peaca an feall ach is beannacht é maithiúnas." – "I'm sorry, my friend. Betrayal is a sin but forgiveness is a blessing."

"Lig don phian tú a thógáil." – "Let the pain build you."

"*Ní féidir ach le cairde dul isteach." – "Only friends can enter."*

Evening Primrose

Chapter Notes

> Apologies for the long hiatus, RL has been a bitch. I also really wanted to get this chapter right so it's taken a lot longer than usual. I've already started writing the next chapter so hopefully will not be as long a wait for the next one! Thanks again for all the support and sticking with this crazy story, hope you enjoy :)

There was an enduring memory that lingered in her mind. It was unique from the others she held dear in that she had not experienced it, not truly. Not personally. Perhaps inherited would be closer to the mark. *Another person's life living in her head*. Being young, *too young to understand the difference,* these memories bothered her less than falling and scratching her knees or being forced to eat her vegetables. Running with her mother and auntie through the well-kept garden, past the acers and the camelia and the bamboo and the large, beautiful gingko tree, she had thought they were funny stories and would spout them at anyone who would listen, lisping and stuttering out words.

And they would watch her, smiling.

It took time, realizing that problems could be bigger than the trivial day-to-day. And that problems could be bigger than even herself. Or anyone of them. *Life was not a stationary stone but a rockslide, and they all moved together.* The early light of maturity snuck upon her to finally make sense of the cryptic, to encourage the budding leaves on the barren tree inside to unfurl and make her finally ask…

"Mama? Who is the woman I see in my dreams?" They had been walking home when she had finally summoned the courage to ask the question, over the dusty rural path by the rice fields near their home. The sun was low in the sky, casting a golden glow across the water where the sprouts were growling, poking their heads up, making ripples. The trees rustled with the soft wind, and her mother sighed. "I wondered how long it would be." When she recalled that day, sometimes she was still surprised by how clearly it appeared to her; *the evening light on the yellow tree leaves, the dust stirring in the air from the wind, noticing for the first time that grey hair had slipped into her mother's hair like weeds, that her smooth skin was pitted with wrinkles when she frowned.* It was the first time she realised her mother was growing older. It had frightened her.

"I suppose we should talk, Chiyo, but not till we reach home," her mother had said after a pause, "I have something to give you. Until then…let's enjoy the walk."

Somehow, the walk was somber, despite the beauty surrounding them. The gift had been a book, or more accurately a series of books; dozens in total. They were removed from the attic, sealed in beautiful and intricately decorated lacquer cases. She had opened them as her mother watched and her aunt made tea, her eyes distant. *Each one revealed hand written words, journals.* She had frowned childishly at them, the writing was a little advanced and the older handwriting difficult to read. Some of the books were very old and delicate. Eventually, her mother took the book she was holding and smiled, bidding her sit down.

“Chiyo,” her mother said, “I will tell you a story, a story that is passed down to all the women in our family.”

And she had listened, rapt. The sun had fallen below the horizon and her mother had continued to read. She had tottered over to put on the lantern, all the while listening to the words. *The flowing words of time.* The shadows against the walls seemed to dance to the melody of her voice. *Her child’s mind imagined the shadows were the people who had written these intricate journals, her ancestors, all women who were once children of her family just as she was.* Her mother read until Chiyo fell asleep, curled up with her head in her mother’s lap. And she dreamed of the woman who had often visited her, beautiful and dressed in finery the likes of which she had only seen in picture books. *Regal and stately but familiar, kind.* Her face was porcelain and her hair jet. She smiled. Reaching out a slim fingered hand, the woman touched Chiyo upon the forehead.

“Okite kudasai, chīsana musume-san.”

The next morning, her mother had awoken to find her daughter with pen in hand, open to the last blank page in the most recent book, writing. Instead of being admonished, Chiyo had been surprised when her mother simply smiled a little sadly. It was only much later that she realised the writing that was in the book she was now continuing was her mother’s own. And that the story she was continuing stretched back through every woman in their family for generations.

That had been three days before she turned twelve. By the time she was fifteen she had written three book’s worth. Not a normal journal as a teenager would. Instead, a flow of words that came directly from the mind. Sometimes, at the end of a session, she would not even know what she had written, and in others she was lucid enough to comprehend it. *Magic*, was how she thought of it when she was young. *Spells*, she thought of it when she grew older. *A ritual*, she finally understood it when she grew up.

Prescience, as she knew it to be now. So many things she had known when she was young had come true, but now as she grew into her thirties her powers had waned. It was difficult to see any future but the same vague darkness that others did. Hopkins would praise her advice as law, as if she were some divine sooth sayer. The found it easy to believe, but the proof he needed was shallow; she knew he would happily believe anything he was told that helped uphold his world view. As heir to the Hopkins family line, he was under just as much pressure as she was to fulfil her family destiny. It wasn’t important for him to know that the most she was able to conjure now was a feeling, like a thread that tugged at her navel and occasionally led her in the right direction, put her in the right place at the right time. She felt like a bobbin on the cotton gin, skipping about across the fates of many, searching for the time when her influence would be needed.

Soon, she had thought as she watched that fool Adebayo preparing the hot branding iron for the powerful creature at his feet, Lecter bound and gagged, *it is soon, I can feel it.* A culmination of years, of lifetimes, or centuries; she felt almost giddy with the responsibility.

It was easy to remember, when she had been fifteen and became curious enough to look back at their family tree, *to try and find the author of the oldest and most delicate of the books*, to find the name of the progenitor of this incessant tradition.

Lady Murasaki. It was all she could glean. When she asked her mother if she knew about this mysterious ancestor, she would never answer.

Only smile.

A vague hint, it was all he had. Descriptions, here and there, that he'd managed to squeeze out of Hannah when she was tired, tipsy or both. Curly hair, or wavy perhaps. Determined. Forthright. Grey eyes, his eyes. Strong with the magic.

The unknown woman from which he sprang, screaming and abandoned.

Mother. *A foreign word. He applied it to Hannah, sure, but that was just a formality. Sometimes Will thought about it, and sometimes he didn't. More often than not he did, and when he did…he would do his best.*

In those days his circles weren't as refined as they were now, just copies from texts, rough and uncultured. Not yet built around his own unique brand of necromancy. Hannah didn't like it, but she didn't seem to be able to do anything about it either. Will didn't understand the dislike: divination of the dead, that was all it was, he just talked to them, helped them.

Except, he supposed, when it became greedy. Now, in the middle of the circle with his fingers caked in chalk, Will Graham knelt on his skinny teenage legs and licked his lips.

Deep breath. Eyes closed. Focusing, focusing as hard as he could, deeper and deeper until he thought he could catch an image in his mind; someone he thought she might look like. He would hold onto it, breathing deep and slow, and recite the litany of the sisterhood.

Nothing ever came of it but sometimes, just sometimes, he thought he could catch sounds: a baby crying. There was a baby crying, or perhaps a woman, or perhaps…

…he always came to, his face wet with tears he hadn't remembered shedding. Will would get angry, it was always easier to get angry when you were young: indignant, hard done by, selfish. He would hoard it all in his heart and wish, beyond anything he had ever wished, that he could see her, pluck her from the void.

He just wanted to see her, just once.

"You won't help me!" he would shout as Hannah tried to calm him, looking around the room in fright as ornaments flew from shelves, as book lifted up and tore themselves apart, as cupboards emptied themselves in a cacophony and the wild magic spat and hissed, "You won't, because she's my real mother, and you're not!"

Words said in anger that became clearer as it simmered, cooled and eventually went out. Lying on the bed surrounded by broken pottery and ripped sheets, Will would try his best to keep to his rash convictions, even if Hannah was the only mother he had ever and would even know, and he loved her more than the fantasy of what could have been.

Pulling in the wheels skidded in the mud and his hand lurched for the handbrake, heart beating a mile a minute. His eyes shuttered back and forth, taking in the droplets of water beading on the windshield, clustered like stars…

…cosmic beauty so terrible and terrifying that his mind could not comprehend the grandeur and endlessness that stretched out before and beyond…

The world tipped, threatening to turn, before swinging back to stable. It was difficult to differentiate between what was real and what was not. One minute he'd been in his skin, and the next he'd been in a memory he still didn't entirely understand. Had he…been there? Has he actually travelled and seen..? Or, even stranger still, was to think that this might be *its* memories. The thing. Were these his thoughts or its? Was it both? *Cross pollination.*

Will Graham sat in the truck, feeling the vinyl of the steering wheel beneath his hands, heart still beating about in his chest like a drum. He closed his eyes and tried to focus. The sound of rain on a windscreen. The damp chill in the air. A swallow of saliva, a puff of breath, a glance to his left. He wasn't truly sure, anymore, exactly where he was. Or what he was.

"You're ok," he muttered to himself, pulling one hand away from its death grip in order to reach over and take hold of the unresponsive hand of his matron slumped in the passenger seat.

The differences were real, they were unimaginable, they were *vast*. They were too much to think about right now when there was so much at stake.

The windscreen wipers were a steady heartbeat backdrop as he struggled to retrieve the limp body from the passenger seat. Rain matting his hair, Will huffed in breath as he shuffled Hannah into his arms and quickly turned, dead weight, to lurch into the darkness towards the only-just-visible front door of the compound. His shoes were soaked, clothing sticking to his skin like a leech.

So far, no resistance. No wards, no alarms, no guards. No one at all, it seemed. Somehow, it served only to set his nerves on edge.

"Hello?" he said for lack of a better word as he knocked against the varnished wood, "I…iarraimid tearmann."

No reply. The rain grew heavier, shooting through the headlights' glow like meteors through the night sky. Gritting his teeth, Will rapped on the door again, harder this time.

"Hey!" he called out as he pulled Hannah back into his arms awkwardly, "Your sister is injured! Don't you fucking care? We need..!"

It would be fair to say that his life was complicated. Whatever the solution was, it would be the last thing you'd expect. This time, as he grabbed the handle determined to rattle it in futility, everything stopped.

Sound became as nothing. Light dimmed. The glare of the headlights vanished, the rain disappeared. Everything vanished, but them.

The void of the other world rose around them, like an embrace. Darkness in all directions, an inky nothing that bit at his calm. So familiar, he had talked to so many spirits here, so many dead faces given their last words in this place and yet…how was this possible? Without a summoning circle, this place should not be accessible, and yet.

His breath seemed to slow, casting out in front of him like a fog. Will felt his skin shiver in response. *Gooseflesh rose, prickling.* Looking down slowly, swallowing in fear, he winced as he beheld the woman in his arms staring straight back at him with dark, hollow eyes.

"*Let me go, sweetheart,"* Hannah breathed out like the last sigh of a corpse.

And then…*everything flashed back in*. The sound of the rain was deafening in comparison to the utter quiet of the other-side. The headlights of the truck seemed dazzling, buzzing frantically. Will panted, letting out a keening sound, trying to haul Hannah back up into his arms as she slipped. He could barely tell the rain from the tears flooding across his cheeks as he crumpled to the ground.

When the door finally opened, Will could barely keep himself upright, barely see. He could feel others taking Hannah from him, her dead weight lifted from his hands. There were people moving past him, a familiarity on the air as they buzzed around him; the smells, the sounds, the sights in their minds: *flashes of herbs and remedies and ritual passages sang in the air, like the perfume of flowers.* Will felt his hands move around in the mud, cold and slimy. Blinking, he tried to focus.

"Well," a croaking voice from above, "it seems things are moving at quite the pace Emeline."

"Too much so, some might say," another voice replied.

The weakness in him wanted to keep him down, and yet their voices called to him siren-like. Will raised his head with all his strength to stare at the two women before him and felt as if he were seeing the broken pieces of his life stich themselves together. The jumble of the mundane and the divine in his mind saw all.

"*You*," he muttered.

They simply smiled as one, their faces identical. Two women, matrons by their dress, watching him with milky eyes in a way that made Will feel as if they had always been watching him. *The photo that was still crumpled into his pocket, of his mother and Hannah and the twins with long blonde hair;* it burned there, hot and bright and glaring. It seemed to superimpose over reality, as he looked at the women now he could see them as they were then, young and vital. One woman lifted her arm and the crow, large and revenant, swooped down through the rain and landed gracefully.

It was as if he could see all the pieces of the jigsaw but was yet to be able to put them together. Staring at the past and the present and the future all at once as he beheld them both. *What is happening?* He could barely think straight.

"Oh my god, Will? Jesus!" the sound of running feet, and then suddenly *Beverly Katz*. She grabbed him by the shoulders, making him flinch; *suspicion and fatigue and worry and elation* – Katz's normally ordered mind was a real whirlwind, "Jack said you were still at the hospital, what are you doing here? Christ you look like shit."

Being brought inside was a blessing because he couldn't have done it without help. Hannah was hurried away by the younger sisters of the order, a limp body, eyes closed.

"Wait…" he tried to say, but instead of a demand it was nothing but a whisper.

"In here," the croaking voice said; he looked forwards to see the twins hobbling off down a corridor lined with candles; Beverly Katz helped him follow, though he wasn't entirely sure why she was doing it.

"It's ok," Beverly was saying as she shouldered his weight, "they want to help us."

He was half helped-half dragged after them with Beverly as a crutch. Will tried to keep up but it was hard; his feet were leaden and his mind felt burned up, shriveled, like a piece of plastic held over a flame. By the time he was put into a chair and could take stock of the situation, he was almost undone.

The space was not large, and yet every part of it had been utilized. Clearly it was a covenstead, a place for meetings and rituals; a larger room housed within the community that created an area for the thirteen to practice powerful magic or celebrations. Normally a sparsely furnished room, this one was in full swing. Icons were drawn into the walls themselves, prepared charms were hung from the ceiling, linked with red ribbon. Herbs were burning and unctuous oils were prepared in bowls. The floor was scattered with leaves from the forest, all in different states of decay. The air was alive with the barely discernable chant of the coven. Women emerged from every door, every chair, every shadow. In the centre, a table covered with a silken cloth that draped to the floor, and atop it the witches were laying Hannah's body down. Taking a stuttering breath, Will let out an involuntary sob.

Something like a funeral rite, he thought.

"She's not dead," he choked out as the women began anointing her body, "please, I need your help."

"We know, we know young one," one of the twins spoke as she stood at a podium leafing fervently through a large, old book though her sightless eyes didn't look at the pages; *Will had given up trying to tell which twin was which,* "we were prepared for something like this to happen."

"You were…wait, what the fuck is going on here?" Will gripped the chair and fixed the woman with a stare that could have started fires, "The hell have you got to do with this?"

"Now he asks," the other twin laughed shortly, "Emeline, do we do it now or later?"

"No need," the one named Emeline shrugged while she directed three of her coven sisters to kneel around the body, "he already knows who we are."

Beside him, Beverly looked out of place and unsure in contrast to how together she had been when he arrived. Will wished he had the time to tell her the truth, but honestly it probably wouldn't have helped. "Will, what is she talking about? I thought you didn't have anything to do with the MCV?"

"I don't," Will ground out, pulling the photo from his pocket with difficulty and holding it in an outstretched hand; when the one name Tremelay hobbled over and took it from him, he noticed she was smiling, "you knew my mother," was all he could think to say.

"From the moment she walked into our lives," Tremelay said, regarding him, "we all knew she was something special, especially your Matron. Turns out, we were all right."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Will bit out, "Do I look like I'm interested in cryptic Practitioner horseshit right now?"

"We were in the coven with your matron, when we were young," Tremelay spoke softly, a stark contrast to Will's anger, "we have grown together, sung the songs together, but Hannah was always the one to tread the riskier path. She would do what needed to be done."

"And my mother..?" Will ground out.

“We were talking about your mother, Hannah Graham,” Emeline said, mouth twisting wryly, “I see your Matron has played her cards closer to her chest than we expected. Your mother was a sacred heart, a witch of the great forest, she was destined for eternity.”

“You’re a pack of fucking liars,” Will dismissed, thought his skin crawled at the implication, “my matron didn’t grow up with my mother, she barely knew her!”

Even as they were interrupted, Will knew that the truth was going to be an excavation, and maybe one he didn’t want to dig up, “Mother, she’s nearly gone,” one of the coven sisters near Hannah exclaimed, “we don’t have as long as we thought.”

“I see,” Tremelay spoke, mouth closing to a thin line. When she turned to Will, he blanched; *her atrophied eyes were alive with a power that spoke to his own*, “if you wish to save our sister, you must bring her back to us.”

“The ritual of passing?” Will shook his head, feeling a little faint, “no, I’ve never done it...”

Tremelay interrupted him sternly, “No, she is too far gone for us to stop her life leaving her body. She has already gone, child. You must find her.”

“Find her,” Will muttered, flashes of Hannah’s eyes staring up at him as he had held her in the mud, as the world around them had sunk into the void, “you can’t mean that I go there!”

“Unless you wish to lose Hannah, it is the only choice,” Emeline spoke up as she returned to the large, ancient tome upon her podium.

“This is fucking nuts,” Will shook his head, “no one goes to the other-side unless they’re dead.”

“Do not insult us,” Emeline said in a severe tone, “necromancer.”

“I don’t bring fuckers back to life! I just speak to them!”

“Well, then this will be a first for you,” Tremelay said, eyes set.

Fuming, terrified, confused, Will Graham opened his mouth to argue further when he stopped, mouth closed. Staring at Hannah, suddenly Hannibal flashed into his mind. *The space they shared, outside of reality, where time did not exist and anywhere was accessible*. Swallowing, Will wondered if he was being a hypocrite. *Maybe…you’ve already been there, this place they’re speaking of. Maybe, you’ve been there all along.*

And if maybes were lottery tickets you’d be a fucking billionaire by now, Will thought wryly.

Frowning, Will turned to Beverly who seemed glad for the interaction with someone she knew.

“Bev, I need to ask you to do something for me.”

“Ok,” she said, trying to sound sure of herself.

“Go to Jack, let him know I’m alright and that I’ll be back soon.”

“Will…”

“Please. I can’t…just trust me. I know we’ve had our differences but this is important.”

“You don’t want me here for this, do you,” she said, voice toneless.

Looking at her, Will could see the contrast. *Beverly was so fucking normal, it made his own life seem more drastic than it really was; or so he hoped.* Taking a deep breath, Will licked his lips and laughed humourlessly.

“Can you get the message to Jack or not?”

“Yeah,” Bev nodded, looking around her as if realizing Will was offering her an out, “ok. Things are getting dicey out there, I don’t know how far even that temp badge will protect you if the Registry start kicking down doors. Don’t do anything rash.”

“Do I ever?” he said flippantly.

Bev didn’t enjoy the joke if the look she sent him as she turned to leave was anything to go by. Will felt the air around him like a physical thing, as if he were moving through water, *as if fate was twisting and resisting as he moved against it.* Turning back, he found both twins staring at him with interest. Reaching over to touch the stone that Hannah lay upon, Will set shoulders and shook out his free hand.

“Tell me what you need me to do.”

It had been too long, that was the thought that kept circling his mind as he paced back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. *It had been too long*.

It was disgustingly familiar, Chilton thought as he once more peeled back a curtain and peered outside. There was nothing going on, but his paranoia demanded it of him to check. Still, this feeling of waiting to find out whether the next step of their plan was viable, waiting to hear if people had survived, waiting to hear of death, it was becoming the soundtrack to his life. *And normally the songs were dirges*.

How long had it been, he wondered, *since Amelia*? That had been her name after all, his wife. So long ago now it seemed further back than it really was. It had been 1930 when she’d thrown him out, it was definitely late summer because it had rained hot and wet for weeks afterwards. He’d lost everything, his business, his wife, his son, his house…on the streets like a rat running from soup kitchen to flophouse.

As he walked over to Buddish, *out cold on the bed, skin clammy and pale but at least the man was alive*, Chilton tried to remember the night he was turned but couldn’t clearly recall. It wasn’t the first time he’d tried to, and certainly not the last; it smacked of madness – *trying the same thing in the same way over and over and expecting a different result.* In the years after his turning into what he was now, he had striven tirelessly to try and find who had done this to him, young and angry. But now that fire had long since gone out, replaced by the apathy of truth. It had taken time itself to burn out that tireless and futile anger.

Then the Vergers. Then the plan. Then the horrors he had perpetrated in the name of progress. In the name of hope.

He would be normal again. He *would* be human again. They all would. The Old Gods would grant their prayers in exchange for blood shed and offerings paid in violence and pain. The plan would *work.*

When the phone in his pocket rang he startled, cursing himself. Buddish stirred but did not wake, and Eva poked her wild-eyed head around the corner, cup of something clutched in her hands.

“What?” he snapped out into the cell phone.

“I’ve found him,” was the reply, one that sang to his inner *hope*; Tobias’ voice, “I know where he is Frederick, but you have to come quickly, there might not be much time.”

“I knew I could count on you,” he smiled as he spoke, “but we can’t travel with Buddish, you’ll need to bring Graham to us.”

“Not an option,” Tobias’ voice was tight, making Chilton wary, “I’m at the Maryland Coven.”

“Your old coven?” Chilton frowned, “Why would he go there, all our intel told us that..?”

“I don’t know, there’s something going on, you need to get here quick!” Tobias cut in as Chilton paced by the window, falling back into his soothing routine.

“We can’t rush this,” Chilton muttered, lifting the curtains slightly to peer outside, “this isn’t…”

Trailing off, he could hear Tobias asking him if he was alright, a frantic lilt to his tone, a coiling feeling of intense worry tightening in his gut. There, on the road, was a car that hadn’t been there earlier and there, further up at the junction, was another. At the bodega across the street, two men were browsing the fruit stands listlessly, and right below him at the electrical box a man in blue overalls was fussing with wires. A seemingly normal scene, but there was something about it, something odd. *Too abnormal, too clean, too staged.* It stank of set-up.

“They’ve found us,” was all he could breathe out before the banging started.

Phone jammed into his pocket, Chilton shut down to a state of pure instinct. All Unnaturals who had survived long enough outside the Registry’s influence developed it at some point. A fence came down around your feelings and your fear and your future; all that existed was *now* and making sure that *now* didn’t become forever.

Sprinting for the kitchen he grabbed Eva by the hand; the woman was already shaking, eyes watering. *Too much fear, too close*, Chilton thought. He pulled her through into the living room where Abigail Hobbs was still sitting, eyes wide.

“But Elliot!” Eva was wailing.

“We don’t have time for him, he’ll slow us down,” Chilton said through gritted teeth as he undid the bindings on Abigail’s arms and pulled her up with an elbow hooked under her armpit.

“No! *No!*” Eva screamed as they all listened to the front door burst open in a clatter of debris. When he felt her wrist slip out of his hand, Chilton had a moment of weakness. *Go after her, we all have to make it out, you can’t leave them!* It was short and bittersweet, as time seemed to slow and he watched her run towards the hallway, her hair billowing out behind her. His will wavered only

for that insignificant chink in time, before it was swamped by his need to survive, his need to see this through, *his need to make all these years be for something and not for nothing*.

Running to the closet he pulled Abigail in with him and slammed the door shut and locked. Pushing through coats and scarves and hanging bags he hit the hidden button and opened the slim elevator, only enough for three at a pinch. The girl next to him was shaking, sniffling, and he hated it. It rubbed against his non-existent calm as they descended, leaving the sounds of his friends fighting their capture behind.

It was strange, almost distasteful, to have the other sisters anoint him. Will hadn't been through a Ritual of the Thirteen in many years. *Seven? Maybe eight?* He wasn't entirely sure, and even then any that he had taken part in had always been with his own coven. People he'd grown up with, knew better than they knew themselves.

The last had been the horrifyingly botched attempt to replace himself after choosing to leave the coven. The man who had come forward seemed perfect, willing and passionate, strong in the magic but unbound by a sisterhood. Will had taken place in the anointing of the man, marking his flesh with sacred texts to keep him safe. *Fat lot of good that did*, Will thought grimly, *considering after Will put him through the rite of cleansing he never woke up.*

The thought didn't sit well with him now that he was in the hot seat. Being touched and painted and anointed with scented oils, runes and glyphs painted onto his hands and feet by a multitude of strangers, he felt itchy and uncomfortable. The stress didn't help. Sitting in a chair by the wall, he kept his hands as fists and stared at Hannah in the candlelight.

"You've got to be kidding me!" he'd yelled after the twins had explained what they needed of him.

"It is the only way to bring her back before it is too late," Emeline had said, a serene smile on her face.

"Oh sure, just let me quickly slit my wrists and travel to the other-side, I'll be back in a jiffy," Will said sourly, "you're sending me after her soul like I'm going to buy fucking milk at the supermarket!"

"My, my," Tremelay murmured, "he certainly is as irascible as Hannah always said."

"You elitists never condoned my necromancy, you always vilified me," Will's eyes narrowed "now you want to use it for your own ends?"

"The world is a different place than it used to be for Practitioners, much more segregated, much more controlled by forces outside the Eye and Tree," Tremelay said, her eyes looking up at the ceiling, "the Registry frowns upon something, we all must frown upon it or fall under their scrutiny."

"This is not the place to talk politics, we don't have much time," Emeline had butted in, "Will you do this to save your matron or won't you?"

"We will be here to watch over you," her sister said sagely.

“And I’m supposed to trust you why?” Will spat, “I’ve only just met you.”

“Because your mother trusted us,” Tremelay said, making Will flinch.

“Yeah,” Will breathed deeply and tried to forget the sound of water splashing, his throat tightening; rubbing his eyes he stared at Hannah, “I’m not sure that really instills me with confidence.”

And yet…here he was. Somehow, a calm had settled over him the longer it became since he had worriedly and frantically agreed to their plan. *Send him to the other-side, find Hannah, bring her back*. Simple, if simple was the definition of defying death itself. Which it wasn’t, he was pretty sure.

Sighing, Will breathed in the sent of sage and clove, felt the heat of the oil on his face and neck, *tried his best to block out the sounds of the voices all around him, jumbled and yet calm, familiar and yet strange.* The thoughts of the sisters were not like normal people’s, not disordered or easily plucked. While a Ritual of Thirteen was in place the only thoughts in a Practitioner’s head were that of the spell and the chant. It was soothing, but also cacophonic, *like a prayer spoken by thousands in a vast cathedral*. Closing his eyes, Will felt the myriad of voices wash over him.

How had he gotten here? Would he be able to pull this off? Where was Abigail? Was this the doing of the killers they had been hunting, or worse was this all engineered by the Registry? Was..?

Was Hannibal alive?

The last question had him taking a deep breath, exhaling. Part of him curled inwards at the thought, and the other burned hot with hate that he wouldn’t get to deal with the man himself. The dichotomy of his feelings made his skin prickle. *Memories of lips against skin, eyes that saw into his being and made him feel welcome, sane, wanted.*

I’ve never known myself better, he thought hollowly, *than when I’m with him.* The words didn’t gel well with the others that sprang to mind along with Lecter’s name: cheat, liar, manipulator, monster…

Blinking the world back into existence he noticed that the women who had been preparing him were taking their places, kneeling around the stone plinth with their heads bowed. The twins were standing at the podium, the book between them. No one spoke, and yet he felt he was directed. Will sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and chewed the flesh, taking a few cursory breaths that he let out as heavy exhales, shaking out his arms and standing, striding purposefully to the head of the plinth. There was no time to think of Hannibal now. *There will be time for that later*, Will tried to think optimistically.

Lying like an offering, Hannah’s face was peaceful, *eyes closed, face slack, mouth rictus in a soft smile*. The vision of her flashed into his mind unbidden.

Let me go, sweetheart, she had said. If it were real. Which was becoming something more and more difficult to discern these days.

“If it were me you wouldn’t let me go,” Will whispered to her, gently touching her shoulder as his shaking hand picked up the knife, “Tá mé ag teacht chun tú a aimsiú máthair.”

When the dagger pierced his skin, it felt like a middle finger at death. Only hours before he had been terrified, trapped, *dying*. Now, he was taunting the one finality that haunted all living things, the one that had yet to catch up with him no matter how careless and reckless he became.

Maybe you should have died down in that coffin, part of him taunted, *maybe you're not meant for this world.*

"Go ndéana an bhandia mo chosaint agus faire orm."

The blood flowed, dripping from the ends of his fingers onto the ground below. Turning around, Will pushed his back against the stone plinth and juddered to the ground woozy. As his head flopped forwards towards his chest, he thought he could hear a woman screaming, louder, louder, *louder...*

Time fell as through a stuck hourglass, grains gripping each other too tightly, reluctant to descend. Many things were both distracting and yet hindering, *the chill of the air upon his skin, the constant and varied sounds of the researchers and experts around him, the changing flows of air that brought scents of death and decay, the painful and uncomfortable blistering skin upon his back where Adebayo had branded him*.

It had been at least mildly amusing to have the scientist confused and frustrated that Lecter had not reacted further to his mistreatment with the branding iron; Adebayo had cursed in a language he did not understand as Hannibal had simply closed his eyes and leaned back his head as if to look up at the sky, not a sound escaping his larynx as the blistering wrought iron branded him. Still, it was a rather miserable thing to deal with now, just another thing to keep him in the present.

All of these factors simply weighed upon a mind that wished for time to flow faster, to bring the future closer. To bring an end to the interminable waiting. It had been so long, so very long. Normally, Hannibal was a patient creature, preternaturally so, a skill bred over centuries, and yet now…

So close, he thought, *the world's worth of recent history culminating in an unknown outcome;* he could only hope that his machinations had been successful. The chess pieces were very slowly sliding into the end game, and he was only able to watch as they did. When the sound of gurney wheels rattling started behind him, Hannibal tensed. The uneven wheels shimmied and wobbled, he could hear it as it grew closer, closer, *closer*, and then…

…passed him. Five feet or maybe four, or so he thought later, because at the time all he could do was follow the sight with steady eyes. There, pushed by one burly attendant and led by another, was a very recognizable corpse.

Bedelia Du Maurier was dumped unceremoniously not twenty feet away onto a small pocket of ritual circles marked with yellow chalk and signposted by the obelisk of obsidian that was sitting seemingly incongruously on the ground at the head of the looping diagram. The researchers there quickly began scolding the orderlies for their treatment, who ignored the diatribe and turned to wheel the gurney back towards the busy entranceway. Hannibal watched out the corner of his eye as they fussed with her body, clucking and cooing like chickens.

My sweet Bedelia, living out your life's purpose must be a succor to your soul, wherever that might be now, Hannibal thought derisively. Even then he disliked the thought of these nobodies handling something he had taken great pains to culture and refine. Bedelia may have been a bane to his existence, but Hannibal had cared for her once.

Once.

As time passed, dredged like silt from the river, more and more pieces arrived. Another gurney: Hannibal was treated to another familiar corpse, the amanuensis in her transformed glory, *skin black like ebony*. Some researchers arrived at the inner circles carrying boxes full of charred bones that resembled charcoal indicating they had been burned long and slow, and others with far wetter and more vital body parts that dripped and curled around gloved hands.

And yet for one so viciously focused, suddenly Hannibal found himself distracted by something so petty and insignificant; an aspect of a young researcher in front of him, pulling off his gloves in a puff of white powder, *and all Hannibal could see was Will Graham pulling off his gloves as he stood at a crime scene, staring into the truth of the violence that had taken place, aloof and unaware of his own beauty.* His lip twitched and his eyes glazed slightly. How was it possible to be so preoccupied, so unerringly fascinated? So much so that he could admit it was the closest he had come to feeling for another…in a very long time.

Holding Will in his mind was a strange thought experiment, *seeing where it took him.* Will was sure to come to his own conclusions on what Hannibal was, and why he had done the things he had done. All others who had learned his secret had either gone mad, become as he was or died resisting the former options. Strangely, Will was the exception to the rule so far as he most certainly suspected or knew that Hannibal was not human and did not seem to care; yet there was still time for things to fall apart.

Odd that you refer to it as such, Hannibal berated himself, narrowing his eyes and scrunching them shut to try and gain some moisture upon the tired skin, *when did Graham become the focus of your outcome? There are more important goals at hand.*

Hours scraped by like days, an endless malaise. He spent his time memorizing the layout of the room, *the exits, the number of employees, the guards and their routes, the nearby rune formations.* After some time he realised that the corpses and bones were being laid out in specific patterns in relation to the phases of the moon which were carved into the stellar ceiling. Eventually, another gurney was heard, even though by this point it was commonplace it still caught his attention. As it rolled by him, Hannibal found it difficult to react. It seemed so simple and yet so overwhelming: the piece that would put this whole affair to bed. *Would bring his life screaming back into relevance and beauty, making his living worthwhile, give his journey meaning*.

Miriam Lass's corpse looked just as it had all those years ago, as he had transformed her into the perfect vessel, though now some adjustments appeared to have been made. Probably by the man who was now striding along beside the gurney looking smugly down at her cold flesh. Hannibal continued to watch as Egon Adebayo curtly ordered the men to position the gurney at the centre of the nearest circle. During his mind numbing wait Hannibal had managed to gauge where he was in relevance to the rest of the ritual. Using the people working on the glyphs as a measure of distance, and the stars above him ingrained into the ceiling, he was quite sure they were in the epicentre. The room appeared to be around one hundred meters across, give or take, flowing out in massive rings, the glyphs and runes creating pathways between each section. And here, in the middle, was the prize.

You'll see her again soon. The thought was intrusive and all encompassing as he watched the two men carefully lift Lass's corpse down onto the ground, *you'll hold her in your arms, the teacup will come back together and she will forgive you.*

He almost didn't hear the *click-clack* of heeled shoes approaching. Blinking, Hannibal didn't take his eyes from the display before him as Lass was maneuvered, but became acutely aware of a presence to his right. There was a pause, what he took for hesitation, but when he tore his eyes away and glanced over it was to find the woman who had spoken to him before, Chiyo. She was regarding him with an odd stare, almost as if she were reliving a moment in time that was solely her own.

Narrowing her eyes, she bent down carefully and reached out with both hands. Even if he had been able to move, Hannibal would have stayed as still as he did. *Waiting.* Without words Chiyo did the last thing he had expected: she undid the heavy gag across his mouth, letting it fall to the floor. It was automatic, to swallow saliva onto his dry tongue, to work his jaw, lick his chapped lips and feel powerful again.

Foolish, he thought, *but curious.* As he watched, Chiyo tilted her head and smiled softly. Hannibal found he was only in anticipation of what would come next, rather than feeling a need to control it.

"It is just as Lady Murasaki described it," the woman said fondly, before standing up, turning on her heel and walking away, her *click-clack* becoming lost in hubbub of the ritual and the room, her robes fading out of view amongst the researchers and attendants, until she was gone from his sight altogether.

It was a bad idea, but she pulled on her coat and braved the cold, rainy night for another hit of caffeine. Jiggling up and down on her toes, Freddie Lounds waited in line with the other caffeine junkies at her local late night place, trying to convince her self of two things:

Not to buy one of the oversized and overpriced cinnamon buns.

Not to post this fucking insane story about Graham that was going to change *everything*.

"Double shot mocha," she said quickly as the blank faced server asked for her order, "to go."

As she walked back, coffee in hand and cinnamon bun in a paper bag in the other, she knew she was going to fail on both points tonight. Scrolling through her phone as she walked was difficult as she juggled her haul of confectionary and caffeine boost, but it was part of the ritual for her. Freddie put the bag in between her teeth and held it there. *More protests had finally been broken up downtown outside City Hall, there had been some minor riots in Downtown but they had been disbanded and police were calling for witnesses*; there was a link to report suspected unregistered Unnaturals straight to the Registry from the Baltimore Police Department website that made even Freddie raise her eyebrows.

Her apartment seemed just as quiet and uncomfortable as before she'd stormed out to find refreshment. Chucking the bun bag onto her kitchen counter, she emptied the mocha into a mug and sat down heavily in front of her desk.

The article still sat there, finished and ready to send in. The editor wouldn't stop it, she knew that, because he always knew Freddie's stuff was ready to go and hot off the press and the punters didn't care about grammar mistakes. That wasn't why they came to the Tattler.

This, she thought as she looked at the photos of Will Graham she had managed to salvage from her snooping into his hospital room, *this is why they come to us.*

The eye still gave her the shivers, the multiple irises staring out as if still searching for her. *You might be making a big fucking mistake here*, the picture seemed to say to her. Who had even heard of a full blooded Unnatural in this day and age? All the freaks she encountered were half bloods at best, and more than that were watered down further and further until all that was left was some fangs or hair or scales. Even the half bloods could only transform under certain circumstances, and they were all controlled rigidly by the Registry.

Graham, however, she knew he was on the Registry lists but hadn't been able to get very far when she'd begun digging. *All classified*, which said more than reading the files even could. Just from that one word she had known he was something…else. What that had turned out to be was still a shock to the system, enough that she had started to doubt herself.

"What if you're wrong Freddie old girl?" she muttered to herself, tapping her fingertips together and leaning back in her chair, "You'll have the FBI and the Registry on your ass before you can say freedom of the press."

And that didn't account for other, less sanctioned, threats. If Will Graham was a full-blood, what did that make Hannibal Lecter. The man was clearly an Unnatural, thought there was never any evidence to be found. Still, he was very, very interested in Graham, and while the FBI and Registry would have to go through official channels to doom Freddie, she knew that Lecter would most likely take the more direct approach. He had done so with her before after all.

"But Lecter's at the Registry now," she told herself strongly, "and no Unnatural is getting out of that hell hole without some sort of divine intervention."

The thought brought a smile to her lips. She took a large swig of coffee, burned her tongue, cursed and took a soothing bite of her bun letting the icing cool the burn. Reaching out she rashly pressed to 'submit', watching as the screen took a moment to load, and then moved on to give her a ticket number for her submission. Her phone vibrated as she received the email notification.

"No going back now," she sighed, wondering if she was going to finally get the fucking Pulitzer she deserved.

Or just a box six feet under.

Endless, and yet contained. Dark, black, and yet he could see in the void. Another realm, and yet the basics of reality remained: a floor upon which he could walk, an echo of sound he could hear, a direction in which to travel.

It was somewhat euphoric; he had never been so free in this place before, always contained to the summoning circle, peering through into the space beyond. Now, he was able to step forth, out into the dark; a symptom of the Ritual of Thirteen, he guessed. Although, he was beginning to wonder if

he had ever truly been hindered when in this realm, or if he had always had this bizarre freedom. *But do you really want it?* He asked himself as he did the only thing he could think of doing: walking forwards and not looking back.

He didn't answer the question. It wasn't worth thinking about. He was here for Hannah, one goal and one goal only. Of course he couldn't abandon her, she was his mother by right if not by birth.

Emptiness, all around him nothing, so much so that when *something* appeared it was much more shocking than it should have been.

"I told you to let me go," the figure flashed up like a jump-cut in a bad film: *Hannah, in silhouette he could still recognize her wizened old frame.* As Will rushed forwards to grab at her arms the figure dissipated like smoke.

"Hannah! Hannah?" he called but his voice felt muted, as if he were listening underwater, "We don't have time for this!"

Another sound, this time behind him. Will spun around and inhaled sharply. A figure, naked and pale, curled up with its head against its knees; as it unfurled Will took a step back, frowning. It opened its mouth and spoke with his voice.

"What am I?" the figure had his face.

Stumbling away, Will felt his heartrate pick up.

"H-hannah!" he shouted, his confidence waning, "Hannah please you have to come back!"

To his right an image blared into life, *Alana Bloom.* She looked older, sadder. She was standing at a funeral. No one else was there. Will grit his teeth and refused to look closer.

Hurrying now, rushing. From somewhere close by a voice whispered.

"He'll never forgive you, you know."

Will flinched away, stumbling and getting back up only to be faced with Brian Zeller sitting in a seat, monitors fastened to his head and chest, his eyes vacant and mouth slack, a Registry scientist watching him dispassionately as the machine buzzed into life. Closing his eyes, Will hurried past.

Then another sound, familiar as the ages, a sound that struck at the core of his being like a harp string. The *clip-clop* of hooves. Will scanned around himself fervently, catching the light reflecting off feathers. Without thinking why, he ran after the apparition, *antlers in the dark*…

…and straight into a familiar room.

Trying to stabilise himself, Will did his best to remember where he was, what he was doing, *why it was important that he hurry*. Instead, all he could do was see the moment in time as a stage play, fall and trip into it like a clumsy extra. The players, one he knew, one he did not. Will stared, mute and transfixed. His coping mechanism, *applying reality to the unreal,* seemed to overlap and the play began.

Int. COFFEE SHOP – DAY.
The heroine confronts her stalker and learns a terrible truth.

MIRIAM: You're nuts lady, you know that? I'm going to have to ask you to stop following me or I'll…

UNKNOWN WOMAN: The important of this meeting is perhaps going to be obvious to you once it is too late.

MIRIAM: Ok that's enough. I'm calling the police.

UNKNOWN WOMAN: If you want to save Will Graham's from the Ripper, you will need to listen to every word I say carefully. If not, he will be damned to a life of torment.

(*The heroine hesitates, despite keeping her blunt and serious manner. She turns to the Unknown Woman*)

MIRIAM: I don't like people following me, and I like people trying to con me even less.

UNKNOWN WOMAN: You are right about Dr. Lecter.

(*The heroine turns and takes a step back into the shop, fervent*)

MIRIAM: *What?* How could you..?

UNKNOWN WOMAN: You had a feeling about him, something wasn't right, you followed your instincts but you found no evidence at his house, in his records, in his alibis. And yet you still suspect him. He gave you the opportunity to return to his home, that he would show you the truth, but you are wary. I am here to tell you that you must accept his offer.

MIRIAM: (*accusatory)* Are you working with Lecter?

UNKNOWN WOMAN: I work for no-one, I am but a messenger through time. I am here to make sure everything follows the right path. If you must be convinced, then I can give you this.

Will watched as the unknown woman handed over a folded sheet of paper, *no it was thicker, less pliable*. He swallowed as Miriam unfolded it: it was the sheet of vellum that they'd found at Miriam's apartment, torn out of a book – showing the Wound Man but notated with elements that linked it to the Olmstead murder. Miriam was staring at it, running her hand down the ragged edge.

MIRIAM: Where did you get this?

UNKNOWN WOMAN: You knew where I found it. You saw the book in his office after all, with the page torn free. Now you know. And now, you will go back to see him. You have no choice.

The lights went out one by one, with the heavy echoing thunk of stage lights, plunging the scene into darkness. *Once more returning to the void*. Will was breathing loudly, his nerves shaken. What the fuck was this place? It didn't seem right, it didn't make sense that this was what he would see here. As he turned to look right there was nothing, then left and…

…there it was, huge, gargantuan, looming out of the dark like a monster from under the bed; *the stag's head, enormous, materialising from the darkness as it swung towards him like a wrecking ball.* Will lifted his arms to protect himself but felt his legs slip from under him. Only, he never met the ground. Instead, the ground seemed to shift and spin and now he was falling, *falling*. The land rushed by like a cliff face, sheer and unforgiving.

There was no landing. There was only air rushing, there was only the feeling of weightlessness. The memory of plunging from the cliff edge with Hannibal in his arms as they escaped the horror of his past.

“You shouldn’t be here,” a voice from just over his shoulder; *Hannah!*

As he opened his mouth to scream it filled with unpleasant salty fluid. Will choked, struggling, and realised he was no longer falling but sinking. His limbs flailed as he desperately tried to tell which way was up. As he kicked out and pushed with his arms, soon he was rushing up, up, *up* and…

…breaching the surface was exhilarating. Until he saw the face there. Will felt his eyes widen to the point of madness, mouth open to cry out. Looming above him, huge and grotesque, his mother’s face split in two, brain exposed and eyes bloodied, teeth loose and falling to splash into the water below like boulders from a rockslide.

“It was to save your soul, my darling child, and my own.”

“No! *NO!*” Will screamed as the water swirled and crashed and lifted him up on a wave; he was deposited upon the shore. Vomiting up water, Will coughed roughly, struggling to right himself. As he leaned back on his knees, he stared ahead, blinking.

Hannah sat there on a rock slick with seaweed. Will stared at her wizened form as water dripped into his eyes from his sodden curls. For a surreal moment there was only the sounds of the ocean and their wordless stare. Drained and broken, Will coughed, wiping at his face roughly.

“You won’t…you aren’t coming back, are you,” he choke out eventually, realization dawning.

“I couldn’t even if I wanted to,” Hannah shook her head, “it’s too late for me. But not for you, if you go now.”

“I’m being watched over, we both are.”

“We’re being prepared for the long journey no one returns from.”

A horrible, sucking, sinking feeling circled in his gut. Will frowned, eyes wide as he stood up and stepped forwards but tripped, falling into a hole *just big enough for a body*. Fumbling, Will turned onto his back, spitting out dirt, and panicked as he saw Hannah above him, face grim, dagger in hand. *The truth of the memory he could not place overlayed itself across this reality, and Will knew it was true*.

“You tried to kill me,” he breathed out, heart bleeding, ripping, *breaking*, “why? *Why!*”

Above him, Hannah hesitated. Will could feel the tears fall freely across his skin, leaving pain in their wake. His matron looked at him like a woman who was facing all her regrets at once. As he watched the lines on her face smoothed out, her silken headwrap fell away showing dark, black hair beneath, her figure filled out and she grew taller, more stately. Whatever passed for reality in this place beyond places warped once more and she was no longer kneeling above him, but instead…

Young and vital once more, she sat kneeling in the front row of a familiar set of women, all chanting as one while there, at their head, stood the woman that plagued his dreams holding the baby that plagued his past.

“I never wanted you to know,” she said, as Will felt himself sinking deeper and deeper into the ground, “we kept it locked away inside you. You didn’t need to understand, you were my boy, my child. You didn’t need to be any more than that.”

“Hannah please just come back with me,” he was pleading mindlessly now, desperate to avoid the truth, “*please.*”

“They don’t understand,” Hannah stood up slowly and approached him, “that there is no way to kill that which is eternal. The flesh which contains it is sacred. History will repeat itself.”

“Hannah please!” Will called out, “Please stop!”

“They are fools,” she smiled down at him, “as was I. I’ll always love you, no matter what.”

“Hannah!”

The void slowly sank back in around him, like a placid lake. Will lay there, motionless, staring up into eternity, unable to look away as the scene that had haunted him, plagued him in snippets and flashes, finally played out before his eyes.

The sisters, Hannah among them, all kneeling net rows with their heads bowed, chanting in unison as there, at the head, *his mother,* with the child in her arms, *not the child, you, say it, you!* She was crying and whispering something but he could not hear it, and he could do nothing but watch as she plunged the child into the water, it waved its tiny arms and legs, mouth open in a wail of confusion, and the moment the child’s eyes closed…a great, black madness erupted from beneath the surface of the drowning pool, *from the innocent child beneath the water,* a mass with teeth and hooves and antlers that screeched unnaturally into their world and promptly ripped his mother into bloody pieces.

The scream came so suddenly that he didn’t realise it was emanating from his own throat, the world began to crumble beneath his mania, dirt and earth a friable slurry, falling, burying, choking. He could feel the truth seeping into the unreality in which he was trapped, suddenly there was noise and screaming, suddenly there was fire and blood, suddenly…

…reality reasserted itself.

One bad dream replaced the other. Will stood, blinking and disorientated, in the covenstead he remembered from what felt like hours ago now, *hours, was it truly hours, or was it..?* No longer serene, now it was burning, the heat of the flames bright against his skin as it consumed structure and furniture and flesh at an alarming rate. Will stared around him in shock, looking down with shaky apprehension. There, at his feet by the stone plinth, the twins lay dead. Or more accurately, parts of the twins, *a leg separated from the hips, head and shoulder and arm separated from the torso, a lone hand still gripping a ritual dagger, insides and outsides all mixed together, shattered like broken dolls*.

Around him chaos licked and burned. Looking down slowly, he brought his shaking hands up in front of his eyes to witness the blood and flesh still caught under his nails, sprayed up his arms and over his clothes, *caught between his teeth*. Outside he could hear the sisters in the rain, screaming and roaring with the voice of legion, one in the many, many in the one.

“Kill the fiend, kill it! Burn its flesh and consume its soul!”

Tá mé ag teacht chun tú a aimsiú máthair:
‘I am coming to find you mother’

Go ndéana an bhandia mo chosaint agus faire orm:
‘May the goddess protect me and watch over me’

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